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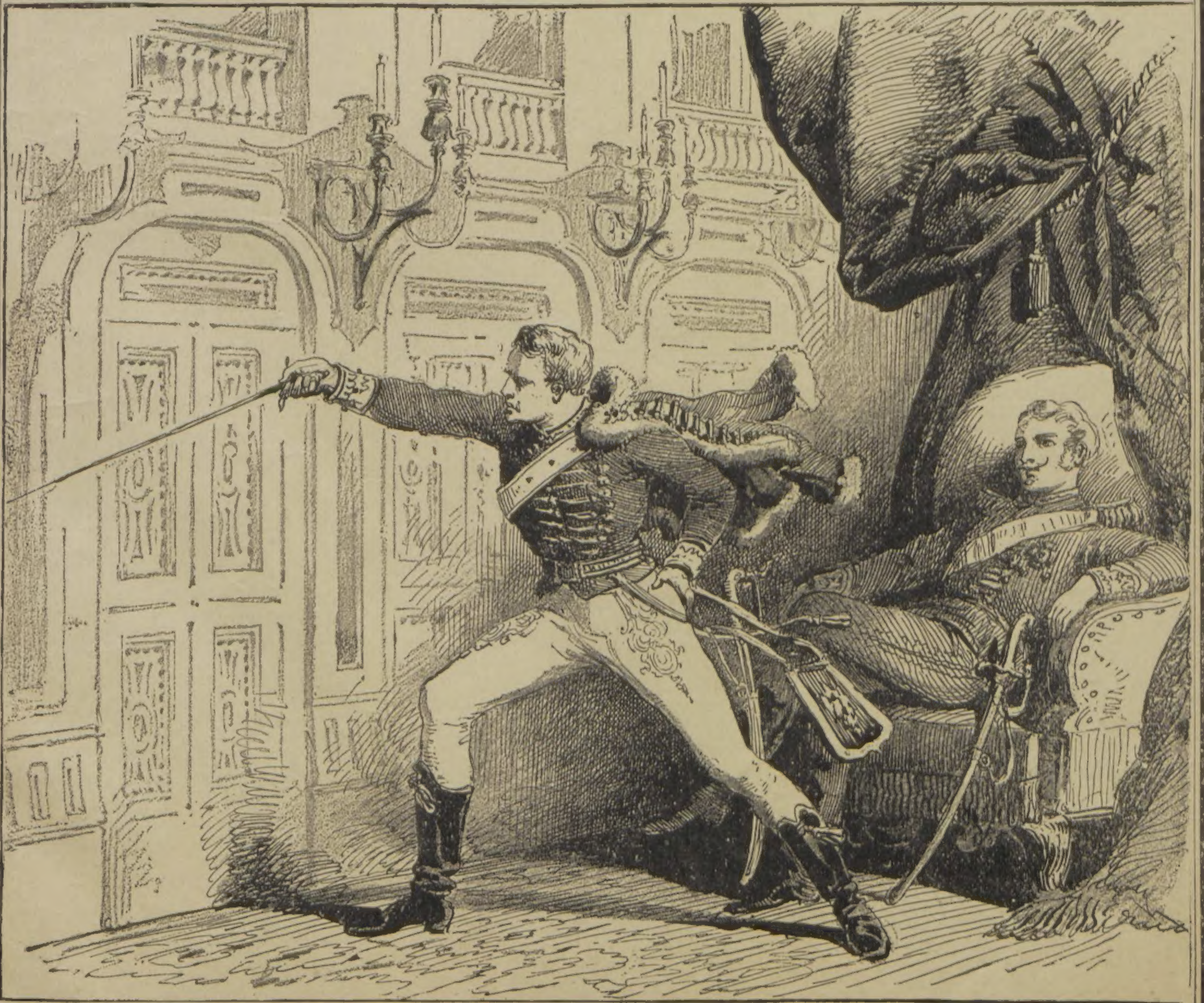
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Iron Wrist, the Swordmaster.

By Col. Thomas Hoyer Monstery.



"OH, THE GLORIOUS SWORD! YOUR HIGHNESS DOES NOT KNOW THIS THRUST—HANSEN'S SECRET!"

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Iron Wrist, THE SWORDMASTER.

A TALE OF COURT AND CAMP.

BY COL. THOMAS HOYER MONSTERY,
NATION-AT-ARMS OF NORTH AND SOUTH AMERICA.

CHAPTER I.

THE ADVENTURER.

The streets of St. Petersburg were full of people, now was gone, the summer had come, and with the world, to see the new czar.

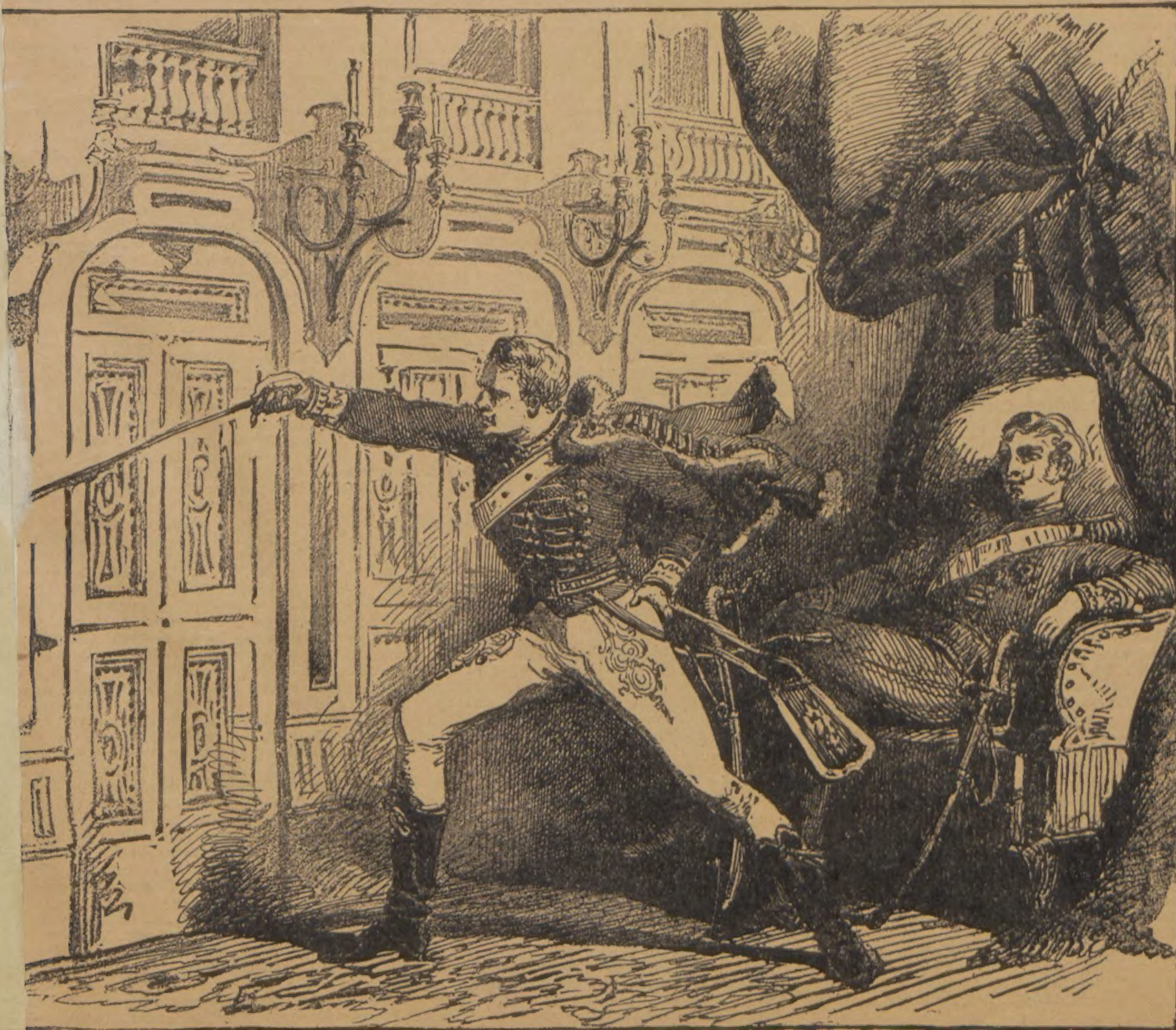
The old Czar Alexander, just dead, had left two sons, Nicholas and Constantine, and trouble was expected as to the succession; for there were rumors that the Imperial Guard was unruly. Nevertheless, Nicholas had been proclaimed czar, and St. Petersburg was full of police and peasants, while the crowds that thronged the streets were swayed with conflicting reports.

This hidden political trouble was not, however, visible to strangers; at all events it did not attract the attention of a young fellow with a knapsack on his back, who strolled leisurely along the broad avenue of the Newsky Prospect, with an air as lordly as if he owned all St. Petersburg, but with that indefinable expression of curiosity about him which marks the traveler lately arrived in a strange country.

Everything seemed to be new to this gay young man, who looked boldly out on the world through a

pair of steel-blue eyes, bright as if they had never known care or misery.

He was a handsome youngster, not more than twenty-two years of age; about five feet ten inches in height, with a frame whose supple elegance was very deceptive. It was not till one scanned him closely that it was perceived that his chest was deep and broad even though his waist was small. There was, moreover, a certain jaunty swing to his shoulders and a spring to his step that told of one accustomed to take care of himself. He was a very fair blonde, and his round, innocent face gave him the look of a boy of eighteen, an illusion increased by the curls of his fair hair, which he wore quite long and carefully arranged. It was evident that the young stranger was vain of his face and figure, and not without reason, for a handsomer boy were hard to find in a summer's day.



"Oh, the glorious sword! It turns a man into a gentleman! See! Your highness does not know this thrust—Hansen's secret!"

But apart from graces of body, there was much in his appearance to attract attention, for his dress was decidedly odd if not outlandish, yet bearing the remains of former splendor and being undeniably picturesque.

It was the rather shabby remnant of a sort of uniform that resembled that of the Hungarian Hussars, with the barred dolman, hanging pelisse, light, leather-seated breeches, embroidered at the sides, and tasseled Hessian boots; though the color, which was gray barred with black, was that of no regiment in Europe, and he carried no weapons but a stick, which he used in walking. The oddity of his general appearance was increased by a genuine Scotch bonnet on his head which consorted ill with the rest of his dress.

Nevertheless, this blue-eyed blonde, with the bold, handsome face, swung his long ash stick as he swaggered along as gayly as if his breeches had no holes in them and the heels of his boots were not worn off at the sides.

It is possible that the presence of a gleaming diamond ring on one hand, and a pin of still greater value in the shirt-frill—scrupulously clean, if frayed—that peeped out from his half-open dolman, had something to do with his lightness of heart, for no man with diamonds need be friendless in a big city, while pawnshops exist.

Such as he was, this singular traveler swung along the sidewalk of the broad Newsky Prospect, as if he owned all St. Petersburg instead of having come in that day from Cronstadt.

As he strolled on, staring at everything he saw, the Neva with its gayly-painted boats, the broad "Prospekt," bordered with palaces on the side away from the water, and crowded with vehicles dashing rapidly to and fro, he became the object of a great deal of attention from two men in dark green uniform.

In St. Petersburg every one above the grade of peasant wears some sort of uniform, civil or military. The stranger had already noticed this fact, but had not been long enough in Russia to distinguish grades. The two men who noticed him as he passed, and who were police officers, fell in behind him at some twenty feet distance and exchanged remarks.

"He is a stranger, Vassili. What is his uniform?"

"What a stupid question! Any one can see that he is a German. Look at his light hair. Perhaps an Austrian deserter."

"No, no. Germans don't wear that cap. That's English—the kind of English they call Scotch. I know it, for I saw a Scotchman once at the English ambassador's ball. He had no trousers, Vassili."

"No trousers, Peter Michovitch! The Scotch must be savages. Nonsense."

"I say I saw him, and he had a petticoat like a woman and bare legs; though he carried a sword. The English have regiments of soldiers like him."

"But this man has trousers, if they are old."

"Yes, but his cap is Scotch. He is English."

"And I say he is German."

"Perhaps he is neither. He may be a Swede; they have light hair, you know."

"Well, we will find out. He should have a passport. We must look at it."

"Come on."

The two police-officers quickened their pace to catch the stranger, who still strolled along as independent as ever, when they heard a great shouting ahead of them, and the people began to gather in crowds and run confusedly to and fro.

Presently the cause of the disturbance was seen out in the roadway, where the droskies were clattering off to either side to make way for a rapidly-advancing cloud of dust, that told of a race in progress.

This sight recalled the officers to their ordinary duties, for racing is strictly forbidden in St. Petersburg, while at the same time nothing more delights the young bloods of the city than to have a brush, risking the interference of the police and a fine if they are caught.

Both Peter and Vassili realized that the mounted gendarmes must have quitted the street for some cause, or these people would not be racing; and both left the stranger unmolested, while they dashed out into the roadway, blowing their whistles to summon their comrades.

Already one could hear the rapid thunder of hoofs at full gallop, coming down the broad avenue, while through the cloud of dust could be faintly perceived the outlines of two vehicles, neck and neck.

The young stranger saw them coming, and his eyes lighted up, while he uttered a jubilant yell, and sprang out into the roadway, waving his hat and shouting out in very poor Russian:

"Ten roubles on the bay team!"

He seemed to be beside himself with excitement at the race, an excitement which all the people shared, though they did not show it so loudly.

Presently the racers dashed by, two vehicles, called *troikas*, each drawn by three horses, and clanging with bells over the horse-collar bows.

One team was bay, the other gray, and the bays were leading by a half-length.

"Ten roubles on the bays!" shouted the stranger, as they passed, and then—"Whack!" he found that he was struck over the shoulders by the long lash of a whip, while a stern voice shouted in Russian:

"Silence, pig!"

In a moment the young stranger whirled round and saw a drosky passing him, with a black horse at a sharp trot, while the driver, a big, heavy man in uniform, with stern, dark face and scanty black mustache, lifted his whip to repeat the cut.

The young stranger's eyes flashed and his face turned white with anger as he threw up his long stick to intercept the second blow, in which he was so successful that he caught the curling lash with an action of wonderful quickness first with the stick and then in his hand. That done, he whisked the whip from its owner's grasp as the drosky passed full trot; then, dropping his stick and seizing the whip, away he went as hard as he could tear after the drosky.

He saw that the man in front was in uniform, but he cared nothing for that. All the energies of his lithe and vigorous body seemed concentrated into the effort to overtake the flying equipage and return the blow he had received; for he plied the whip furiously as he went, striving to strike the drosky ahead of him, and once or twice reaching the hind wheels.

CHAPTER II.

THE PURSUIT.

In the meantime the two police officers, who had sprung out into the road with the apparent design of stopping the racers, had shrunk back when they saw the pace at which the teams were coming; for even a Russian policeman is not given to dying at his post in the effort to arrest a rich law-breaker.

As they shrunk back, they saw the drosky following the racers, noted the slash given the enthusiastic stranger, and saw him catch the whip and give chase to his insulter. The man in uniform shook his reins and shouted some words in Russian as he quickened his pace, when both policemen, as if at a signal, threw themselves before the angry pursuer, crying:

"*Poshli von! (Go away!)*"

But the young stranger was not to be stopped. Without a word he ran on, and as he came up against one of the guardians of the law, gave a swift nod of his head, half sidewise. The effect was terrible. He caught the unwary officer full in the face with the hard top of his own head, and knocked him down, senseless and covered with blood. The other policeman clutched the stranger, but only to go down in his turn with another butt of that flaxen head, delivered so swiftly that it hardly seemed to delay the runner's progress.

Then away went the seedy young man after the flying vehicle, running like a deer, and still clutching the long whip.

The short delay with the police had enabled the man in uniform to gain twenty or thirty feet on his pursuer, and his horse was now galloping after the racers; but the angry stranger never heeded as he ran along behind the drosky, with a fierce, resolute look on his young face that transformed it entirely.

The drosky did not gain on him a foot for at least a block, and then he suddenly shed his knapsack in the road, and ran on faster than before.

The people on the sidewalks shouted with laughter at the spectacle, for he had lost his cap.

"Go it, white-head!" they cried, and still he ran on.

But the best man cannot outrun a galloping horse for any distance. The drosky began to gain on him at last, and the man in uniform looked back with a mocking smile and waved his hand as he turned to the right and dashed down a cross street.

The white-head stranger set his teeth and ran on, keeping his prey in sight, even while it was gaining, and presently uttered an exultant cry.

The black horse turned into the gateway of a huge, gloomy-looking palace, and disappeared.

"I've got him now!" panted the stranger, in his own language, and then he ran steadily on till he came to the gateway.

There were two sentries there, and both charged their bayonets at the sudden apparition, but too late.

Before the clumsy Russians could realize the meaning of the irruption he had dashed past them, waving the whip, and was half-way across a paved court toward a flight of stone steps.

At the foot of these steps stood the black horse covered with foam, and a big-bearded Russian stood stolidly beside it.

Otherwise the court-yard was empty, save for the two sentries, who were now shouting to him to come back.

But the young man had not come this far to go back. He flew at the big Russian like a tiger, seized him by the long beard and gave that appendage a "yank" that elicited a roar of pain from the sufferer, while the stranger's

face became fairly demoniac in its fury as he shouted:

"Where is he? Tell me or die!"

The Russian was much larger every way than his foe, but there was something in the manner in which he was attacked that quite demoralized him. One hand of the stranger clutched his beard, and the other was on the side of his neck, the thumb-nail dug into the jugular vein of the Russian behind the ear, in a manner to give horrible pain. Down went the man's head to the ground, as he yelled:

"Mercy! Mercy! My lord is inside!"

The stranger flung him away with an angry curse in Danish, and turned to the stone steps, up which he bounded in a hurry. He had picked up the whip again, and cracked it as he went. All alone in St. Petersburg, in the midst of a strange palace, that he only knew contained a man who had insulted him, and probably that man's friends and servants, he strode forward, cracking the long whip, and looking fiercely round him for his foe.

As for the two sentries, stupid Russian recruits that they were, they gave up the pursuit at once, on seeing the fate of the big Russian, who was none other than the *dvornik*, or private watchman and doorkeeper.

"He is a lunatic! Leave him alone!" was their verdict, as they saw the stranger boldly enter the great house; and they did not seem to be far wrong.

Meantime, the young man entered a great hall, with statues all round it, and bright frescoes on the walls. A broad flight of white marble steps was before him, and up these he ran lightly, cracking the whip all the while.

Not a soul was to be seen, and the whip-crack echoed in the silent house as in a cavern.

"Halloa! Where are you, coward?" cried the young man, angrily. "Come forth from your hole and get his whip I took from you."

But no answer came, save the soft closing of a door at the end of a long stone corridor.

His ear caught the sound, and away he went down the corridor at a run, till he came to a door at the end, which he flung open.

He saw an anteroom, magnificently furnished, a gayly-dressed page asleep in a big arm-chair, and a door beyond.

Not heeding the page, he passed on to the door and opened it.

Before him spread a huge saloon, seventy or eighty feet long, hung and furnished in white and gold.

At the end of it a figure in uniform, that he recognized as that of his enemy, was passing out of another door.

"Halt, coward!" cried the infuriated youth, as he dashed forward, but the man in uniform paid no heed to the request, vanishing through the doorway.

Without a moment's hesitation the bold stranger ran full speed across the room, leaping chairs and tables in the way, and seized the handle of the door.

It was locked.

Uttering a savage cry, he looked round for something to force the fastening, and then ran to the window, hardly knowing why he did so.

The window looked down into the court at which he had entered; and as he looked, the two sentries and the *dvornik* were in earnest conversation, pointing to the palace and their own heads, as if telling each other that an escaped maniac had paid them a visit.

Then for the first time it seemed to burst on this rash youth that he had made a fool of himself in his fury, and he realized that he had lost his hat, and was in a strange house.

"Never mind!" he muttered aloud, in Danish; "I'll find him, if I have to seek the czar's cabinet—Ha! there he is!"

As he spoke, he beheld, to his amazement, his deceptive friend in uniform, down in the courtyard again, entering the drosky. How he had got there, our young man never paused to inquire, but away he went down the saloon at a run, dashed open the first door he saw and found himself—not in the antechamber, but in another hall, with a flight of stairs ending in a corridor below.

Only conscious that he must get out somehow, he ran down the steps and along the corridor, blundered into another court-yard, surrounded by buildings, and full of huge chained boar-hounds, who bayed at him like wild beasts, and finally came out into the original court, to find his enemy gone, and a very distinguished-looking personage riding in, escorted by a guard of Cossacks, all uniformed in red.

This personage was a handsome gentleman, in full general's uniform, blazing with orders; and he swung himself off his horse at the foot of the steps, just as our seedy and hot-tempered young man bolted out of the palace.

Therefore, the first object on which the eyes of this great personage rested was our adventurer.

The seedy young man's face turned crimson, and the great personage stared at him with undisguised surprise.

Then, on a sudden, a smile came over the handsome face of the Russian, as he called out, in Danish:

"Why, Olaf Iron Wrist, hast thou come at last! And with an adventure, too, I'll be sworn! Welcome, my king of swordsmen, welcome! How camest thou here?"

The young Dane's countenance became bright as he stammered out:

"Oh, your highness, forgive me. It was a mistake. I followed a fellow who took refuge here and he has fled."

CHAPTER III.

THE GRAND DUKE.

To say that the retinue of the great personage were amazed at the sight of seedy, hatless Olaf—uninvited—at the palace door, is a weak description. They were scandalized and stricken dumb by the sacrilege, and stared at him open-mouthed. The instant recognition of his highness hardly pacified them; but they were silent perforce as the gorgeously-dressed Russian noble ran up the steps and cordially embraced the seedy young Dane; for Dane he certainly was.

The great personage hugged the young man and then held him off, laughing heartily, as he cried:

"An adventure, Olaf, an adventure, I'll be sworn! Tell me all about it at once. How didst thou stumble into my house?"

"Nay, your highness," answered Olaf, smiling; "I was angry at a fellow who struck me with his whip, so I caught the whip and chased the man. I followed him only to get satisfaction, but he ran in here and out again without my catching him, because the house was strange to me. He has gone now."

His highness listened attentively, and asked:

"Is that his whip?"

"Yes, your highness."

The Russian prince took it and examined it carefully. On a silver plate in the handle were the Russian letters, "V. S."

"Do you know these initials, Olaf?" he asked, gravely.

"No, your highness."

"Then ask no more. Let the man go. If you meet him, do as you please; but don't hunt for him. He will meet you soon enough. Come in to dinner."

His highness looked thoughtful as he laid his hand on the shoulder of the Dane, but Olaf hung back.

"Pardon, your highness; I am not dressed. I have lost my hat and knapsack."

The prince turned to his suite.

"Count Draukovitch, send a sergeant to Strogonoff's bureau, and say I want this gentleman's hat and knapsack sent here. The police must find them. You understand?"

A very dandified young officer, with a wasp waist, made a salute and turned away, while the prince continued:

"Gentlemen all, I wish you to understand that this is my particular friend, Count Olaf, of Copenhagen, surnamed Iron Wrist, the greatest swordsman in the world. You will respect him henceforth, or Constantine of Russia will know the reason why."

Instantly there was a general bowing before the seedy young Dane, thus suddenly come to honor, and Olaf himself seemed perfectly bewildered, for he stammered out:

"Highness, is it possible? I thought—"

"You thought I was simple Count Labanoff, and you find I am the Grand Duke Constantine. Well, Olaf, to thee I am the same as when we had our adventures in Copenhagen together. Come in and tell me how thou camest here. What wind blew thee?"

"The west wind, your highness—the old story—once too often in *carte* over the arm. I had to run for it."

They were going up the corridor to the grand saloon, and the Grand Duke Constantine caught him by the arm, inquiring, eagerly:

"Did you kill him, Olaf?"

"No, but his ambassador was after me."

"How many does that make, and who was he?"

"Only thirty-seven, your highness. Indeed, I would not have fought the gentleman, as I hate quarreling, but he was a French *maitre d'armes*, and I could not refuse, for the honor of my old master, Hansen."

"That was right. Those French think they can fence. Was it a hard job?"

"No, your highness," answered Olaf, with a shrug; "only a few passes. Those French are good at the lunge, but they don't understand effective parries. He lost his sword twice to me."

They entered the anteroom, where the drowsy page woke with a start, and the Grand Duke Constantine passed on with his strangely-met guest into the great saloon. There he sat down by him on a sofa and said:

"Olaf Iron Wrist, thou art the very man I have longed to see for some time. I have adventures for both of us. My friend, I love such a woman as the world never saw before. Wilt thou help me?"

"Highness, what a question! To the death!"

The Russian knew the answer before he asked. He had met Olaf, the best swordsman of Copenhagen, while on a visit to the Danish capital, and had taken a great fancy to him. The

grand duke had always been a perfect enthusiast in fencing, and adored fencing-masters in proportion to their skill. He had traveled Europe incognito as Count Labanoff, and had thrown himself into adventures of all kinds with the enthusiasm of a boy.

Olaf, come of a noble but impoverished family, had been well contented when assigned as a boy to a military cadetship, and had applied himself with such fervor to the school of arms that at twenty he had been able to hold his own with the best masters of the Danish capital, then and now recognized as the athletic center of Europe, whence come the best gymnasts and swordsmen.

Wild and quick-tempered, he was always in trouble, and no sooner was one duel off his hands than another was on. He had been exiled to Hamburg already for one of these scrapes, and the last had been so serious that he had come to Russia to seek his fortune, trusting to find his unknown patron Count Labanoff, who had promised to befriend him, and who had turned up in such unexpected fashion as the czar's only brother.

All the Russian Olaf had learned he had picked up from his patron, but it was enough to serve his turn.

"Your highness loves a lady. Can it be that your choice is not free—you, the czar's brother?" he asked.

Constantine smiled rather sadly.

"If I were not the czar's brother I might wed whom I pleased, but royalty has its cares, Olaf. I love—oh, how I love her—but she is—Polish."

"Well, your highness; what of that?"

"The late czar conquered the Poles, and the present czar keeps them down. I cannot marry without his consent, and he will not give it."

"Why not run away with her?" suggested the rough-and-ready Olaf, who began to scent an adventure.

"It is indeed our only chance, but we must leave Russia to do it."

"All lands are the same to a Dane, highness."

"Yes, and we must find a priest, Ole. Understand, no one could prevent my taking away Natalie Dembrinski or keeping her here in my palace, but when it comes to marrying—ha!—that is different. They care not for her good name, but they will not let a Pole come near the succession of Russia. Dost see?"

"I see, your highness."

"Well, Olaf, set thy wits to work. Thou wert always the best hand at a plan in our number. What am I to do?"

Olaf Iron Wrist got up from the sofa and began to pace the room. He seemed uneasy, for he frequently looked round as he missed something to which he was accustomed.

The prince noticed and inquired:

"What is it, my Ole?"

"Pardon, your highness; I am thinking, and my ideas never come to me well unless I—"

"What is it? Ah, I remember, there on that table you will find it—we wear one belt."

He pointed to a table near by, on which lay a rich hussar saber and sabertache.

"Keep them, Ole. I do not wear hussar dress any more, so they are yours."

"Thanks, highness."

And without more ado the swordmaster buckled on the rich accouterments and gave himself a shake which rattled every buckle with satisfaction. Beside the sword on the table lay a pair of light dueling rapiers, and one of these he picked up with a pleased laugh, throwing himself into fencing position and shouting:

"Now, your highness, I can think! Oh, the glorious sword! It turns a man into a gentleman! See! Your highness does not know this thrust—Hansen's secret—he taught it only to me, and you will not betray it, highness?"

"Never, Ole."

The grand duke was an enthusiast also, and loved every point of the swordmaster's craft.

"Behold! My antagonist lunges high and I parry high *carte* and retreat. He thinks he has me—he follows and pushes in *carte*. Presto! I parry in octave—thus—opposing my hand high in *carte*—and away goes his sword in the air over his right shoulder. It is a master trick and there's no parry to it. Well—as I was saying—about the lady—ah!—I have it, your highness, I have it."

Instantly he stopped his passes and flourishes and sat down with his chin leaning on the sword, speaking slowly and gravely:

"Your highness needs a priest—why not take a Pole? He will not refuse."

"But the Russian Government will not recognize the marriage, unless it be made in a Russian church by a Russian pope* or monk."

Iron Wrist jumped up again and began to

* Russian parish priests, of whatever rank, are called "popes;" "pope" being the same as "papa" or father. The popes are compelled to marry, but the monks who live in convents are vowed to celibacy. The bishops and higher officers of the Russian Church are all taken from the monks. Sometimes an ambitious pope, who has lost his wife, enters the ranks of the monks, leaves his parish, and ultimately rises to high rank.

make the sword fly in all sorts of ingenious *moulinets* or circles, whistling through the air.

"Bah! It is vexatious! The small sword will not solve the problem. Let us try the saber. That never failed me yet."

Slash! slash! whistle! whistle! went the blade in the hands of this peculiar young man, as he went through the sword exercise, cutting off imaginary heads and whirling about like a maniac. At last he shouted:

"Aha! I have got it!"

Then he sat down as gravely as before.

"Your highness, it is all simple. We find a poor Russian pope, bribe him to perform the ceremony, and give him money enough to leave Russia."

"But he cannot leave Russia without a passport, and will not dare to offend the czar."

"Leave that to me, your highness. If I take him with me, we will leave Russia in spite of all their police. Only find the priest."

"But that will be a dangerous undertaking, Ole."

"Your highness, danger is the swordmaster's trade. Leave it to me, if you will find the priest."

"He is found now, Ole. I have an estate near the border, where we have a village. Pope Andrei Androvitch would die for me."

"Then that is settled, highness. Now for the lady. Where is she, and will she dare to fly?"

"We must see to that to-night, Ole. Will you come with me on a visit to her palace?"

"Yes, highness."

"Not so fast. The czar has strictly forbidden me to go there, and police spies are on the road and all round the palace. If I am caught and arrested, the czar will exile me to command in the Caucasus; and I don't want to go."

"Your highness will not be taken."

"How will you prevent it?"

Olaf Iron Wrist made a whistling cut through the air as he answered:

"That way. They may take me, but never my patron. I am ready."

"But it may mean Siberia to you, if they take you."

"They have not taken me yet. Will your highness risk it?"

"Yes."

And the swordmaster smiled as he heard the word. It promised an adventure.

CHAPTER IV.

VASSILI OSTROF.

ST. PETERSBURG, as some people know and many more do not know, is built on a cluster of islands that form the delta of the broad blue Neva. The fashionable part of the town is on the southern bank and mainland, but a large portion stands on Vassili Ostrof or Basil's Island, to the north. This is the commercial part of St. Petersburg, the river-side faced with solid granite quays; but on the outskirts stand more than one grand old-fashioned residence, near the fortress where the czars are buried and where the state prisoners are confined.

At the extremity of Vassili Ostrof, not far from the great stone bridge that spans the Neva, was a huge gloomy building, more like a prison than a residence, the surrounding garden in turn encircled by a high stone wall. Just as the clock of St. Isaac's cathedral tolled twelve, on that night, two men on horseback approached this wall from the bridge and reined up in the black shadow cast by the full moon on the northern side, away from the river.

They could hear the calls of the sentries and watchmen relieving guard all over the city, but it was quite quiet where they had halted.

"This is the place, Ole," whispered the grand duke, who wore his uniform no longer, but was clad in the dress of a *boyar* or private gentleman, as was also his companion. Both wore swords.

"Very good, your highness," returned the Dane. "I will keep watch while your highness goes in to speak to the lady."

The prince laughed.

"There is no need of that," he said. "I am not in the habit of staying outside."

He raised a silver whistle to his lips and blew a soft note, low and vibrating.

Instantly there came a clatter of bolts from inside the wall, and a door opened, not twelve feet from where they stood, in a place where no opening had been before perceived by the Dane. Into the dark aperture the Grand Duke Constantine rode, and Iron Wrist followed.

As he passed in, he noticed that the door was, to all appearance, made of stone, though how that could be he did not pause to inquire. No sooner had both passed through than they heard a sharp whistle from the other side of the road, and Olaf wheeled his horse in a moment.

Through the aperture he could see at least twenty dark figures rushing for the door, but hardly had the vision met his eyes when the door clanged to, with a hollow, metallic sound, and lo! the wall was as rough as elsewhere, all traces of an entrance having vanished.

The grand duke laughed at the amazement on his follower's face, as he observed:

"Our secret door is well made, Ole. The police have been watching for it ever so long, and

I defy them to find it unless it opens. Even I cannot be certain of it unless it is daylight."

"It is wonderful, your highness; but how shall we get out, with those fellows waiting for us?"

"There are many roads to Rome," answered the prince, sententiously. "Now is your time to watch."

They had seen no one inside the garden so far. How the door had been opened was yet a mystery to the swordmaster. He sat on his horse in a brilliant flood of moonlight, in the midst of a formal Dutch garden, where high hedges and box-trees trimmed into all sorts of fantastic shapes, presented a weird appearance in the moonlight.

"Stay here," continued the grand duke, in a low tone, "and listen to those fellows on the other side of the wall; I don't think they will dare to climb over, but there may be one bold enough. If so, you know what to do."

"I flatter myself I require no orders in such a case, your highness," replied the Dane, significantly. "Your highness may rest content. I will watch."

The prince dismounted from his horse and gave the bridle to Olaf, after which he stole away toward the great, gloomy house, where not a lamp twinkled, but which, nevertheless, he seemed to know thoroughly.

The swordmaster listened a few minutes, and heard low, muttered voices in the road outside, but could not distinguish the words on account of his imperfect knowledge of Russian. Then came a series of blows on the stone, as if the police (he realized they were police) were sounding, to find the door.

Their efforts seemed to be in vain. Though he was in the moonlight, and had come through that very entrance only a minute before, he could no longer distinguish any traces of a door, and the noise of the blows sounded as if all were made on a common surface of unyielding stone.

Quietly he dismounted from his horse and led the two animals into a neighboring arbor that seemed made on purpose for them, where he tied them to a tree and went back to the wall.

He could still hear the voices, and now came a scuffling, scratching sound, which he rightly interpreted into an attempt to scale the wall.

Olaf heard a voice say, in Russian: "Stand steady, or I shall fall. Now!"

Then he looked up, and saw the top of a man's head appearing over the coping. Before the eyes of the policeman had come over, the quick-witted swordmaster had slipped behind a box-tree, and was peeping through the branches, quite unseen.

Presently the man's head came into sight, covered with a round flat cap, and then it was followed by a stout body in uniform, gleaming with brass buttons. The police-officer rested himself astride on the top of the wall and looked round.

"They are gone into the house," he said, in a low tone. "Throw me up the ropes."

Olaf saw the end of a rope thrown over the wall, which the police-officer threw down into the garden. Then he looked round cautiously.

"I shall have to drop over," he said. "There is nothing here to tie it to."

"Be quick then, pig!" cried a stern voice outside.

Olaf started. "The man with the whip," he muttered. "Now we shall see. So he is on the police."

The young swordmaster smiled with grim satisfaction as he turned his belt a little round, and brought the butts of a pair of double-barreled pistols to view beside his sword-hilt. There were no revolvers in those days in Russia.

He had determined at first to prevent the police from entering the garden, but the voice of his hated enemy changed his mind.

Quietly he remained where he was, and in another moment saw on the top of the wall the well-remembered dark face of the "Man with the whip."

CHAPTER V.

THE MAN WITH THE WHIP.

YES, there was no mistake. There was the tall, burly figure in uniform, the stern, fat face, full of sensuality and determination, the face and figure of the man who had struck him that very morning with the driving-whip.

The swordmaster quivered all over with eagerness as he looked, for he feared lest the "Man with the Whip" might not enter the garden. He saw the first officer drop over and carry the end of the rope to the foot of a box-tree, but the "Man with the Whip" remained astride of the wall, and did not seem disposed to intrust his person inside as yet.

Olaf watched and saw that he carried another whip now, the short Cossack scourge, with its long lash, which he held doubled up, and with which he gesticulated and pointed.

"Fasten the rope tight, pig. There are ten men to follow thee. Come along now, fools. What are you afraid of?"

The Man with the Whip appeared to be a good deal of a hectoring bully, and Olaf smiled, with a fierce light in his eyes, as he listened.

Presently another head came over the wall, and a second police officer sprawled across the top, his foot having slipped in climbing.

"Now, swine, what art thou doing?" cried the Man with the Whip, angrily, and he struck the clumsy climber with all his force, dealing such a blow that the amazed officer gave a frightened howl and rolled over into the garden without using the rope.

The sight so inflamed the indignation of the swordmaster that he forgot his prudence, and rushed out, pistol in hand, crying:

"Come down, coward! come down! I have your whip! Come down, if you dare!"

His appearance produced an immediate stampede.

The Man with the Whip said not a word, but went out of sight like a shot, without waiting to bandy words with the pistol; the police officer who had come over by the rope took to his heels incontinently, and the other, who had fallen on his head, lay still, and pretended he was dead.

With rapid decision, the swordmaster pulled over the rope from the other side into the garden, for he knew from the clatter of feet that the police outside had run. Then away he went after the man inside, who, he knew, was cornered, and ran him down into an angle of the garden wall.

There the man turned, desperate, and drew his sword to defend himself.

Olaf Iron Wrist laughed, and returned his pistol to his belt, as he advanced on the frightened policeman.

"Get over the wall," he said, sternly. "Get over it, I say."

Then he drew his own sword and commenced to threaten the unfortunate man, laughing all the time in a manner that frightened the other half to death. He did not make a blow, but the poor Russian thought one was coming every moment.

At last, in desperation, the policeman made a stroke at the head of Iron Wrist.

With a taunting laugh his sword was struck up, while his wrist was clutched by Olaf like a vise, and he received at the same moment a kick in the stomach, which doubled him up into a powerless heap.

He let go his sword and dropped groaning on the ground, when the swordmaster pricked him up again with the point of his own sword and the stern order:

"Get up, there. Move on!"

Doubled up, with his hands on the pit of his stomach, the police officer was driven along beside the wall to where his comrade was lying, apparently quite dead, when the Dane roused him also, to sudden life, with a prod, saying:

"Get up, quick. Bring out your irons."

He knew that policemen carry handcuffs in their pockets.

Both men obeyed in fear and trembling, when the shrewd Dane obliged them to handcuff each other, sit down on the ground and submit to be securely "bucked" with their own swords, which he passed under their knees and over their arms.

Then, feeling secure in his own mind that they could not escape, he proceeded to gag them with the rope on which they had climbed into the place, tied them back to back with another turn of the same rope, and left them to their own reflections.

He had hardly accomplished his task to his own satisfaction, when he heard steps and perceived the tall form of his noble patron approaching, with a lady hanging on his arm.

CHAPTER VI.

THE PRINCESS NATALIE.

THE Grand Duke Constantine looked as happy as an accepted lover, with a very beautiful lady on his arm, could look.

Olaf the Dane removed his cap and bowed low before a lovely creature, tall, slender, dark-eyed and dark-haired, who moved with a swaying grace that reminded him of a weeping willow in a breeze.

"Natalie, my treasure," observed the grand duke, "this is my brave Iron Wrist, of whom I have told you. It is he to whom you must look as your protector in the journey. Look at him well, that you may know him."

"Good, your highness; he looks like one on whom a woman could call for help in time of need," said the low sweet voice of the lady called Natalie, as she smiled slightly and turned a glorious pair of dark eyes on the Dane.

Olaf Iron Wrist blushed scarlet and fidgeted to and fro. For the first time in his life he, who was usually very forward with women, could only stammer in a bashful manner:

"The honorable lady may know—I—I would die to help her and—and—his highness."

The Grand Duke Constantine smiled at the sudden bashfulness of his follower, and to put him at his ease inquired:

"What of your watch, Count Olaf? Who are these?"

He pointed to the fettered policemen, who looked up at the dignified grand duke in evident alarm, for it was clear that they recognized him.

Olaf shrugged his shoulders.

"Oh, these are only some fellows who were too curious, your highness, so I shut their mouths that they might not tell all they saw. Perhaps I ought to have cut out their tongues—but it is not yet too late."

The two prisoners uttered a groan in spite of their gags at this cool proposition at which the duke laughed.

"No, no," he said; "we will not be so severe this time. Unbind them, Olaf."

It was the best point of Olaf Iron Wrist that he had been bred to obey orders implicitly, and he made no objection to this command, whatever he thought.

In a few moments he had cast off the rope and withdrawn the swords wherewith the prisoners were trussed, when both rose to their feet, trembling excessively, while the lady had to turn her face aside to conceal a smile at the glance with which Olaf regarded them.

Then Constantine raised the little silver whistle to his lips and blew the well-remembered low call. Again Olaf heard the clanging of bolts, and again he beheld an opening in the wall, but in a place he could have sworn quite different from that at which he had entered.

The grand duke addressed the two prisoners, who were still handcuffed, in a stern but quite passionless tone.

"Give my compliments to Count Strogonoff," he said, "and tell him that the next time he comes after Constantine of Russia, he will do well to avoid private houses. Go!"

The two men bowed their heads humbly and ran out into the road, when the opening in the wall was suddenly closed with a clang, and there was the dead stone surface again.

Iron Wrist watched it closely, and could not see how it was done, for the secret door was in the shadow of a thick box-tree and the opening and shutting were almost instantaneous.

Constantine noticed his look of wonder and smiled.

"That is one of the secrets of the Dembriski palace, Olaf. The princess will explain it to you, some day. In the mean time, if ever you wish to see her take this whistle, come here at midnight, blow two short puffs, and you will see an opening. Enter it quickly, or it will close again and leave you outside."

Olaf took the little silver whistle with deep respect, and the lady asked her companion:

"Does the count know when to come and what to do, your highness?"

"I will tell him," replied the prince. "Listen, Ole. This lady is the Princess Natalie Dembinski, my affianced wife. If all goes well, to-morrow night will see her on the road to the frontier under your care, my comrade, if you will undertake the task."

"I will do my best, highness."

"To-morrow morning, to divert suspicion," continued the grand duke, "I depart for Warsaw; his majesty the czar, my brother, having appointed me governor of the province of Poland. The princess remains behind, and you are to stay at the palace, as my master-of-arms. To-morrow night you are to come here on horseback, at twelve, give the signal and enter the garden. You will find the princess in waiting, and a guide with her. This guide will take you both to a carriage waiting for you in a certain place, and there are relays of horses on the road. Your duties are comprised in one word, 'Fight.' The road and the vehicle are provided for, but it will be full of enemies who will try to stop the princess. You are to clear the road. Can you do it?"

"I can try, highness," was the modest reply. "How many enemies shall I have at a time?"

"Not more than six, and there is this in your favor, that they will not be allowed to use firearms. The czar wishes to take the princess and my agents alive."

"I will do my best, highness," said Olaf, slowly; "but I can only promise that the princess shall not be taken while I live."

"That is enough, my brave friend, and now to horse."

Olaf was a very discreet youth, and he showed it in the present instance by bowing low and ostentatiously turning his back, as he went to untie the horses. He was quite a long time in performing this very simple office, and seemed to have a great deal of trouble in leading the animals from the arbor by a devious route.

The consequence was that, when he returned to the place where he had left Constantine, he found the grand duke alone, the lady having vanished, and all the tender passages common to engaged lovers having passed unobserved.

Constantine smiled on his faithful follower, and then both mounted. The grand duke rode across the garden by the silent house to the south side, when he drew rein close to a clump of Norway pines by the wall, and said in a low tone:

"Sound the whistle twice."

Olaf obeyed, and instantly the wall opened, disclosing a view of the river and lights of the Admiralty Palace on the opposite side.

Constantine shook his rein and rode through, followed by the Dane, and hardly had they emerged when the sharp clang of the bolts behind them told that the stone door had closed.

The swordmaster could not help looking back

with renewed wonder at this singular contrivance, and his patron observed:

"That is an invention of the old Prince Dembinski, whom you have not seen. There are six of these stone doors in that wall, so carefully made that no joint is perceptible, and all are operated by one man in the house, who sees nothing and works by signals. It was but an amusement for the prince; but it has served my purpose well. Come, we are safe now. All the police of the capital dare not touch me, unless they find me disobeying the czar's order."

"And me, highness; am I safe, too?"

"While you are with me—yes. Otherwise—no."

The two rode off.

CHAPTER VII.

THE CIRCASSIAN CHIEF.

THE palace of the Grand Duke Constantine was all in confusion next morning, the bustle of departure pervading every place. To be sure, there was no moving of furniture, but the greater part of the prince's retinue was going with him; and his kennel of huge boar-hounds, with its little army of attendants, was all ready for the move.

The outer court was full of Cossacks, Circassians of the escort, and Russian officers of the grand duke's staff; the officers chatting together while they awaited the arrival of their chief, discussing with great acrimony the character of the new swordmaster, who had been closeted with Constantine half the morning.

"Who is this Count Olaf, I wonder?" asked Count Draukovitch, the dandified, curly-headed, wasp-waisted aide-de-camp. "By heavens, gentlemen, I hardly believe he is a count, at all! Counts don't carry sheep-skin knapsacks."

"These Danish counts are nobody," remarked a tall, burly Cossack. "The fellow is a common fencing-master. You know his highness is nearly crazy about such."

"Let us set a few of our best swordsmen at him," suggested a stout, red-faced major. "If the fellow is a master, he ought to earn his title here."

"I fancy you have no swordsman here could hold his own against him," gravely observed an old officer. "I have heard of this man before. They say he was Hansen's best pupil, and fenced a tie with his master."

"And who was Hansen?" superciliously inquired Draukovitch. "I never heard of him. He never fenced in Russia."

"There are many things you never heard of, count," calmly returned the other. "Hansen was called the 'Sword King' of Copenhagen. I myself saw him, at a public entertainment, sit on a chair, with a sword in each hand, and hold his own against two French masters, one on each side. They could not hit him in five assaults."

Draukovitch stared, and all looked incredulous.

"My poor Ivanoff, I fear you had been taking too much vodka (Russian whisky) that night," lisped the aide-de-camp, sneeringly.

Captain Ivanoff's face flushed, and he was about to make an angry reply, when the subject of their comments, Olaf himself, came slowly down the steps toward the group, advancing with a sort of lazy grace peculiar to himself.

He was dressed in a very gorgeous uniform, the special invention of the grand duke, who wished to do as much honor as possible to his favorite craft. It resembled that of the Hungarian hussars, but was composed of richer materials, and blazed with gold all over the breast.

In his fur cap he wore a tall heron-plume supported by a clasp of brilliant jewels.

Naturally his appearance was the occasion of intense jealousy, of which he took no notice, for he saluted the group with the greatest courtesy and observed:

"Good-day, gentlemen! I am very happy to present my compliments to such distinguished cavaliers."

There were some stiff salutes, but Captain Ivanoff took his hand and shook it warmly, saying:

"I, for one, Count Olaf, am glad to welcome the famous Iron Wrist to the grand ducal household. These gentlemen will not believe me when I tell them that the great Hansen, of your city, beat two French masters at once, sword in hand."

Olaf smiled and shrugged his shoulders.

"It is true, I believe; but it was before my time. I would not dare to undertake the feat against two masters, but I will try any two gentlemen here with the sharp point, if they wish to see it done."

He spoke with exquisite courtesy and such an insinuating smile, looking round into the faces of those present, that every one shrunk back a pace. He had a peculiar way of smiling, while his eyes dilated and gleamed, that was quite demoralizing to a timid man.

The big Cossack officer alone shrugged his shoulders.

* Incredible as it may seem, this story of Hansen is vouched for at Copenhagen.

"I know nothing of the small-sword," he observed, scornfully, "but I can take any man that ever swung a saber and cut him down—unless—yes, I will be frank—unless he be a Circassian of the Guard."

Instantly Olaf's face lighted up with eagerness. "I have heard of these Circassians," he replied. "They tell me they are famous swordsmen. Have you any here? I have long wished to see them."

The Cossack laughed.

"Look at them. There are at least a dozen here, with Tekli Aga at their head—those in mail."

Olaf turned, with great interest, to look at these renowned swordsmen, and beheld several stately men of very remarkable personal beauty, standing in a group apart from the staff of officers.

They were all of lithe, active-looking frame, and all wore helmets and chain armor, which gave them a strange, medieval appearance in the midst of the modern costumes.

"And are those Circassian chiefs?" he asked.

"Yes, and Tekli Aga is the most renowned swordsman of his tribe," replied the Cossack. "I can cut down any ordinary man, but I defy the devil to hit Tekli Aga; for he is like a flash, and never meets your sword. I tried once, worse luck, and got a slash on the thigh that laid me up for six months."

Olaf Iron Wrist gazed curiously and longingly at the Circassian.

"I have fought men of all nations," he observed, musingly. "French, German, Dutch, English, Swedes, Danes, Spaniards, Italians, one Arab, and a negro; but I never yet fought a Circassian."

"No, nor a Cossack, neither," interrupted the Cossack officer, with a frown; "or you would not be here, now."

The swordmaster looked at the big man from head to foot with a peculiar smile, perfectly amicable.

"My good gentleman," he said, raising his hand in a deprecatory fashion; "do not get angry and try to make me fight you. I have seen all the Cossacks I want, and they are good men, but stupid—stupid. I cannot fight you. It would be murder."

The big Cossack stamped his foot, angrily, and laid his hand on his sword.

"By the head of Czar Ivan, the Terrible"—he began; but he was interrupted by Olaf, who laid one hand on his arm, in a caressing fashion.

"Now, my dear friend, be patient. I do not want to fight you, but I should dearly like to measure swords with Tekli Aga. That is one of the few distinctions left me in this world."

The Cossack laughed heartily at this request, for he was a good-natured fellow at bottom.

"Why, Tekli Aga would cut you to pieces," he observed. "There was a French master came here to seek an adventure, and he must needs fight Tekli Aga. By my father's head, the Circassian cut off his sword hand with one blow as neatly as if a surgeon had performed the operation, and the Gaul never got so much as one thrust at him."

Olaf listened eagerly and inquired:

"Did the Frenchman use the small-sword?"

"Yes."

"He was a fool; he might have known that a thrust leaves the wrist exposed. That is the secret of knife-play."

"Well, you will be another fool," observed the Cossack, sagely. "I see Draukovitch has been putting him on you."

In fact, they could see Count Draukovitch talking eagerly to one of the Circassians, a dark, handsome fellow, with glittering black eyes, and occasionally pointing to Olaf.

The young Dane said nothing, but smiled as one well pleased, and presently Tekli Aga left his friends, came over and joined the group around the swordmaster.

Count Draukovitch performed the ceremony of an introduction with great outward politeness, but an evident undercurrent of malignant satisfaction, and the two champions looked at each other.

They were strikingly alike in face and figure, one fair-haired and blue-eyed, the other with raven hair, great, liquid black eyes gleaming from his dark face; but their features might have been those of brothers, and neither failed to admire the other.

The Circassian began the conversation.

"You want to fight me?" he asked.

"I should esteem it a pleasure and an honor," replied Olaf, with great courtesy.

"How many have you killed?" demanded Tekli Aga.

"Not one," the swordmaster replied, in a tone of great pride and satisfaction. "I never yet killed a man."

The fierce, handsome face of Tekli Aga curled its lip in a contemptuous smile.

"Me—eighteen dead," he retorted. "You none. How many wounded?"

"Thirty-seven so far," answered Olaf, in a low tone of self-depreciation. "I confess it is not many, but you know I am naturally very peaceable and hate a quarrel. Every one of these affairs was forced on me. Only thirty-seven."

"You were wounded—how many times?" asked Tekli Aga, slowly, as if considering.

"Only twice. In my first duel and in the seventeenth. The last was a cut on the foot, from a clumsy brute of a Spaniard in Madrid."

The Circassian nodded and looked thoughtful.

"Me wounded only twenty-three," he admitted. "Get hit five times. Never mind. We must fight. When?"

"Make it this evening, by moonlight, on Vassili Ostroff," suggested Draukovitch.

"Agreed," was the unanimous verdict, and then every one scattered; for the ushers announced the grand duke coming out.

CHAPTER VIII.

THE TUMULT.

THE Grand Duke Constantine mounted his horse and rode out of the court-yard, beckoning to Olaf to ride by him while he gave him some final private directions.

Just before starting, he spoke to his suite:

"Count Draukovitch will remain behind till the last of the baggage is safely on the way, when he will bring up the rear. Swordmaster Count Olaf will accompany me to the Imperial Palace and then will return to take charge of the household, till the Chief of Police reports with the guard. Tekli Aga and the Circassians will remain with him. To horse, gentlemen!"

Amid the clashing of arms saluting, the brilliant cortege rode out of the palace, and Draukovitch remained on the steps, decidedly ill-tempered at the duty to which he was assigned.

The grand duke had not gone more than ten minutes, and the last baggage-wagon was rumbling out of the yard, when a drosky drove rapidly in, and the stern, forbidding face of Olaf's enemy, the "Man with the Whip," made its appearance.

This personage seemed to be well known to the aide-de-camp, for he greeted him cordially.

The Man with the Whip jumped out of his drosky and came up the steps to Draukovitch.

"Well, have you discovered anything?" he asked, in a low tone.

"Nothing certain, but I suspect—"

"Well, well, what do you suspect?"

"That this devil of a swordmaster is in the plot."

"Of course he is. He was with the duke last night."

"But I think I have laid a little counterplot that will end in drawing his teeth."

"May St. Isaac prosper the plot! He is not a man, but a fiend. He beat two of my best men last night as if they had been babies, and tied them up like chickens."

"Well, I have put Tekli Aga on him. They are to fight to-night on Vassili Ostroff, near the Dembinski Palace."

"Good!" and the Man with the Whip slapped his knee with an oath of great satisfaction.

"We will have them, then. If Tekli Aga fails to kill him, we can have a dozen men ready to arrest him, but we'll give the Circassian first chance—eh, Draukovitch? We may as well save the czar's forces, especially in a delicate matter like this."

Draukovitch grinned and then inquired:

"How are the guards now? Do they accept the czar?"

"My dear count, that is precisely my difficulty in the whole thing. The Constantine party is immensely strong, and there is no telling at what moment some hot-head might ring the bells and start a revolution. If it were once known that we had killed a follower of the grand duke to prevent his doing his master's will, there would be a mutiny at once. We must encourage him in his deeds. After all, he is mortal."

"They say that he chased you through the street all alone, Strogonoff, only yesterday," slyly observed the aide-de-camp. "Is that true?"

The Man with the Whip flushed a deep purple and ground his teeth as he answered, reluctantly:

"It is true. He is a maniac. I saw him yelling in the streets; and you know, Draukovitch, how necessary it is to keep things quiet now. So I gave him a cut over the head with my whip as I drove past, and bid him be silent, as I would to any Russian on foot."

"That was right," observed Draukovitch, sentimentally. "I always strike a serf first and speak afterward. What did he do?"

"Upon my word as a noble, he turned on me like a hungry wolf, snatched the whip and chased me—me—regardless of my uniform—like a hunted stag. I told the nearest men to get in his way, but he knocked them down like ninepins and I was forced to flee here. Draukovitch, would you believe it, he chased me into the palace. The man is a maniac or a devil, but I will get him in irons yet; and then—ah! count, the knout has tamed maniacs ere this."

There was a peculiarly brutal look of determination in his dark, sensual face as he said this, and Draukovitch laughed as if he enjoyed the prospect.

Their conference was cut short by the clatter of hoofs in the street, and Draukovitch observed:

"Here he is, coming back, I think. He is—"

be left in command till you report to him that the guard is ready to take charge of the palace. How will you relish that, Strogonoff?"

The face of the Man with the Whip, otherwise Strogonoff, had been changing all the time that the malicious aide-de-camp was speaking, turning almost green, while the usual purple spots on his mottled complexion stood out white and ghastly. The muscles of his cheeks twitched and trembled as he stood there, and his knees shook beneath him.

He evidently wanted to run, but did not dare while any one was looking; for his eyes watched the open gate of the court-yard with an apprehensive look, and his mouth was half-open.

Presently into the open gateway galloped a horseman all glittering in steel and gold, and the Man with the Whip drew a long breath of relief as he ejaculated:

"It is only Tekli Aga, after all."

The brilliant Circassian rode up to the steps and said to Draukovitch:

"Make haste—the train is all up and his highness in the carriage—Count Olaf is coming up the street."

"Then good-by, Draukovitch," said Strogonoff, hastily, as he climbed into his drosky and drove off. "Remember to make them fight."

Draukovitch laughed as the other vanished, and observed to Tekli Aga:

"Won't it be disagreeable for you to be under the orders of this Dane all day, when you are to fight him to-night?"

The Circassian gravely shook his head.

"He is a brave man," he answered. "If I kill him, I shall be the best in Russia. We are friends till we fight."

Draukovitch stared at him as if only half understanding his meaning, and the next minute they heard the voice of Olaf in the street, shouting loudly, amid a clatter of horses' feet, going at a gallop.

The aide-de-camp slapped his thigh with great glee and climbed on his horse in a moment, saying:

"I'll wager ten roubles the mad swordmaster has seen Count Strogonoff."

His conjecture seemed to be correct, for almost immediately the flying pelisse of Olaf passed the gate at a furious gallop, his horse doing its best, while the swordmaster swayed to and fro a long wagon-whip which he had seized from a driver.

"By the bones of Czar Peter! he's seen him and is after him again," cried Draukovitch, excitedly. "Let us follow, Aga."

He rode out of the court-yard with all the glee of a boy running to see a cock-fight, and beheld Olaf rapidly galloping down the side street, which was almost empty of people, and gaining on the drosky, which the aide-de-camp knew contained none other than the chief of the Russian secret police, Count Strogonoff.

With the same eager glee Draukovitch galloped after, and saw Olaf gain on the drosky, lift his long whip, and commence a most unmerciful thrashing of the chief of police, to the horror of a single passing police officer.

He was not destined to continue long, however; for, hardly had the first blow fallen, than Draukovitch saw a white puff of smoke from the sidewalk, and heard a sharp report, when down went Olaf's horse on its knees and head in the street, while Strogonoff drove on faster than ever.

But, to the aide-de-camp's surprise, the swordmaster seemed to have fallen on his feet, for away he went after the drosky again on foot, leaving his horse.

At the same moment the policeman who had fired the shot darted into a house near by, and Draukovitch smiled as he noted the terror inspired by this redoubtable Dane, who had dropped into their household as if from the skies.

Presently Olaf, seeing himself distanced, gave up the chase and came back, waving his whip and talking to himself with a tone of savage excitement, so different from his smiling courtesy of the morning that Draukovitch felt his heart jump as he addressed him:

"Good-morning, Count Olaf. That policeman served you a scurvy trick when he shot your horse. Whom were you chasing so earnestly?"

"The Man with the Whip," replied the angry swordmaster. "Ah, what luck I have! Shall I never catch that villain?"

His eyes were glaring to and fro, as if seeking his enemy; and he treated Draukovitch with scant courtesy, as if he had forgotten his manners in his excitement.

Then he turned on the aide-de-camp in the same menacing manner and asked, sternly:

"Who shot my horse?"

"A policeman. He ran round the corner," replied Draukovitch, promptly.

"Another policeman! Then he belongs to the police, that wretch. Who is he?"

"Why! did not his highness tell you?" enquired Draukovitch, in a tone of surprise, more to gain time than anything else; for he did not wish to answer.

"No, he refused to tell me."

"Then, my dear Count Olaf," responded the aide-de-camp, in the sweetest of tones, "you

cannot surely expect me to disobey the orders of his highness."

Olaf Iron Wrist shook his head discontentedly as he turned away, remarking:

"No, no, of course. It is strange, however, that all of your people shield this villain. He came out of your palace."

"Well, my dear count, his highness may have important state reasons for employing this man, if he be on the police, as you say."

"I say nothing. Let us go back," answered Olaf, a little sulkily, for his usual politeness was much ruffled.

He took his way back to the palace on foot, while Draukovitch, with a courteous salute, galloped away.

Not a person could be seen on the side street in which the fracas occurred, and the young officer augured that some excitement was drawing them away to some other part of the city.

He galloped on toward the imperial palace, expecting to find the explanation of the mystery, and heard an ever-increasing hum as he advanced, which confirmed his suspicions.

"By heavens!" he muttered, "it would be too vexatious if, after all, a mutiny should occur and spoil all our plans. It must be something of the sort."

As he entered the Newsky Prospekt he found the whole street blocked with people, and he could see, close to the Winter Palace, the white tilts of the grand duke's baggage-wagons, halted in the middle of the crowd.

He rode into the midst of the people who were densely packed into the roadway, and began to ply his whip, in Russian noble fashion, over the heads of the nearest, to clear a passage, crying:

"*Poshli von! Poshli von!*" (Go away!)

But he had not struck an ordinary Russian crowd this time. Rather a mob of Dutch burghers, fully aroused, such as tore the De Witts limb from limb in the public streets in old times.

In a moment there was a roar of rage, and a hundred hands were raised to seize him and clutch his bridle.

So demoniac was the expression in every face that Draukovitch quailed before it and cried:

"I belong to the Grand Duke Constantine. For God's sake let me through."

"Leave him alone," roared a rough peasant. "Clear a way for the good Constantine's aide-de-camp. Go forward, *batushka* (little father), go forward."

The transformation was startling, and Draukovitch understood his position in a minute. The mob was in favor of Constantine; and if so, a riot was impending.

"Let me through," he cried; and immediately a way was opened through the crowd as if by magic, while the young noble spurred his horse eagerly to the gates of the Winter Palace.

When he got there, the black mass of heads packed the whole street, while through the wide open gates could be seen a tossing, gleaming forest of bayonets, that told of the court filled with troops, but also that those troops were no longer to be depended on.

Full of anxiety, and almost equal curiosity, Draukovitch rode within the court-yard, and found it, as he had supposed, crammed with troops, in a terrible state of excitement.

The men were all in their ranks, but they were pounding the butts of their muskets on the ground and shouting at the top of their voices:

"Hurra for Constantine! Hurra! Hurra!"

The officers, he could see, had withdrawn from their men, and stood in little groups on the flanks, with pale faces, and a terrible look of anxiety, talking in low tones and furtively watching the soldiers.

Outside and inside the palace not a blow was struck, but at intervals arose that mighty roar: "HURRAH FOR CONSTANTINE!"

Draukovitch looked apprehensively around.

"Now, for a riot," he muttered, "if some fool starts the cry, 'Down with Nicholas!'"

And almost as he spoke, a big, bearded sergeant bellowed:

"DOWN WITH NICHOLAS! CZAR CONSTANTINE!"

Draukovitch turned pale, and all the officers drew their swords. The mutiny had begun.

CHAPTER IX.

THE MUTINY QUELLED.

No sooner had the big sergeant shouted, "Down with Nicholas!" than the very opposite effect was produced to that which Draukovitch had anticipated.

A dead silence fell on the comrades of the sergeant as two or three pale-faced but desperate-looking officers rushed at him with drawn swords and dragged him out of the ranks.

Then the silence spread all round the court and into the crowd outside.

No one seemed to know why they were silent, any more than why they had shouted before; but for all that the hush became universal, and even the big sergeant said not a word, but submitted like a lamb, as he was dragged away.

Then Draukovitch heard the clatter of hoofs on the pavement, and beheld the czar himself, with his brother, both in full uniform and blazing with orders, riding slowly into the midst of the troops at the head of their staffs.

They were very much alike, these brothers; but there was a pale, frightened look on the czar's face that detracted from his personal appearance, and he sat his horse in a fashion that showed him to be a poor rider.

Constantine, handsome and portly like all the Romanoffs, more German than Russian in their looks, was smiling proudly as he looked round at the troops. He felt that the destiny of Russia lay in his hands that day, and that his elder brother knew it and relied on his silence for safety.

He said not a word, but sat still on his horse, and then amid the deep hush, the emperor spoke.

His voice was a little tremulous, but it was harsh and loud as he cried:

"The soldiers of Russia have honored the brother of the czar, and the czar thanks you. My brother has consented to assume the burden of government in the Province of Poland, and is about to depart thither. Officers, to your posts!"

As if by magic, the groups of officers broke up and hurried to their posts, while the lately turbulent ranks of soldiers stood as silent as the grave.

Only the little group round the big sergeant did not let him go, but hesitated.

The quick eye of Nicholas noted the exception, and he rode forward, angrily inquiring:

"Why do these not obey?"

Draukovitch found courage to salute and say: "This man shouted treason sire! We arrested him."

The czar turned and transfixed the big sergeant with a look. He saw a stupid peasant face and realized at once that such a man was only a tool.

He waved his hand loftily.

"The czar forgives everything to-day. Let him go to his post. Stay! What is your name, sergeant?"

"Ivan Ivanovitch, father," replied the sergeant, in the patriarchal fashion of the Russian soldier.

"See that you do your duty, Ivan," said the emperor, sternly, "or we shall meet again."

"Yes, father. Thank you, father," answered Ivan, humbly, and he went quietly to his place in the ranks.

The czar waved his hand to the officers who had arrested the sergeant, and said, in a low tone:

"Report to the cabinet this evening, gentlemen. The czar does not forget his friends."

This was said with the sweetest of smiles, for Nicholas was keenly aware that he was still in a very nervous predicament which required his best management, and that he needed friends.

Then he rode back to his brother, and shouted:

"The Grand Duke Constantine, my brother, departs for Warsaw. The troops will salute him."

Everybody had been waiting for the signal, and in a moment the muskets clanged out on the pavement in the Russian "Present," where the butt rests on the ground, the musket held at arm's-length; off went the men's hats, and a deep-toned "Hurra! Hurra! HURRAH-H-H!" echoed from wall to wall.

The officers at their posts were still very pale. They knew that the whole trouble had arisen from this very shouting before, the men refusing to stop; and they held their breaths as the last "Hurra" pealed out, expecting a repetition of the former scene.

But, the charm was broken. The czar himself had given the word, and the shouts were followed by a deep silence, amid which Constantine embraced his brother and rode out of the court-yard into the street.

Draukovitch drew a long breath of relief, and turned round to meet the gaze of Count Strogonoff, the chief of police, who had got into the palace by some means, and now stood behind one of the battalions, his pale face very white, while he breathed hard.

"I thought it was all up with Old Russia," muttered the aide-de-camp, as he stooped from his horse, in passing.

"We must be careful. Send me all the news," was the reply, in the same cautious tone, and then Draukovitch fell in behind the staff of the master on whom he was detailed as a police spy, and rode out into the Prospekt.

The crowd was rapidly dispersing after the usual fashion of the Europeans and Asiatics of the lower orders. They had come to hear the shouting, ready to rush at any one of the opposite faction, and now they were equally ready to gape stupidly at the brilliant staff and escort of the Grand Duke Constantine, and to go peaceably home as soon as it had passed by them.

The long line of baggage-wagons clattered away; the Cossacks waved their long lances and trotted off; the wild-looking Circassians of the guard sheathed their cimeters and settled into their saddles for the long journey; and so the pageant moved away.

In those days there were no railways in Russia, though many were to come under the energetic rule of Nicholas; and the athletic grand duke was one of those who always rode on horseback rather than take a carriage, even when posting stages.

As for Count Strogonoff, he remained in the court-yard of the palace till the troops had filed out and returned to their barracks, and then his eye caught that of the Czar Nicholas.

Neither said a word, but both men understood each other, thoroughly. The czar nodded and dismounted from his horse, reëntering the palace, while the chief of the secret police threaded his way through a labyrinth of dark passages in the basement of the same building to a little door, which he unlocked, disclosing a stairway.

This stairway he ascended till he came to a door, at which he knocked softly.

It was opened almost immediately by the czar himself, and the chief of police entered the private cabinet, to be met by the question:

"Well, count, what news? More danger, yet?"

The emperor's tone was very anxious, and Strogonoff's grave face did not reassure him as he answered:

"Yes, sire. The grand duke was at the Dembinski Palace last night, and had with him a certain Danish swordmaster, called Olaf, who is a devil incarnate. He was there to meet the Princess Natalie, to plan her flight, and this Dane is to be her companion and protector."

"How do you know this?"

The question was quick and anxious.

"Two of my men fell prisoners to this Danish devil, and he bound and gagged them. They heard the grand duke tell the princess that the swordmaster was to be her protector in a journey."

The emperor started.

"And your men: how did they get out?"

"His highness ordered their release, sire, and they were let out of one of the holes in that enchanted garden, as they call it, where no man can find a gate."

"And when is this ambitious lady to flee?" asked the czar, in a bitter tone.

"To-night, sire. At least, I fancy so. His highness ordered the swordmaster, in public, to keep the palace till the police-guard arrives, and that would let him off to-night. But we have one chance to stop the whole business."

"What is that?"

"He is to fight a duel to-night, before he departs."

"Oh, that will not delay him if he is a professional swordsman."

"Possibly it may, your majesty."

"Why?"

"He is to fight Tekli Aga."

"Tekli Aga! The Circassian who killed one French *maitre d'armes*, and slashed a hand off the other?"

"The same, your majesty."

"That is good. It would not do for the police to kill him in the present excitement, but—by the by—is this Tekli Aga in my guard, or my brother's?"

"In the guard of his highness, sire. It was a plot which one of my spies fomented—Count Draukovitch."

"Very good," observed the czar, in a tone of great satisfaction. "Now, how are you to arrest him?"

"Very simple, your majesty. As soon as they are fully engaged, my men will rush in and seize both, without any risk. One is perhaps as dangerous as the other."

"But suppose your men fail to take them?"

"Then, your majesty, my men can have orders to shoot both. The Princess Natalie can never escape when the swordmaster is gone."

"See that she does not, Strogonoff, if you value your place. If my brother marries her and has legal heirs to the throne before I do, there may be trouble yet."

Strogonoff bowed low and retired, muttering:

"I know that as well as any one—worse luck to me."

CHAPTER X.

DRAUKOVITCH TUMBLES DOWN.

THE sun was setting that evening and it was nearly nine o'clock—for it was midsummer in high latitude—when Count Draukovitch, looking more ill-tempered than ever, rode a tired horse into the grand ducal palace yard and asked for "Count Olaf, the swordmaster."

Poor Draukovitch had been worked hard that day, and felt he had a right to be ill-tempered. The grand duke had ridden fast, and had been sending his staff back and forth all day with messages, finishing by ordering Draukovitch on a thirty-mile gallop to report to the new swordmaster and give him a letter.

"It's not the ride I mind," growled the aide-de-camp to Tekli Aga, as he dismounted, "but it's being sent to report for orders to that upstart. Where is he?"

The Circassians, who had been left behind, in charge of the swordmaster, were lounging round the court-yard, where Tekli Aga was sitting on the inner steps by a bronze lion.

"The swordmaster is within," answered Tekli Aga, in a grave tone. "He waits for the guard."

"What! hasn't the police guard come yet?"

"No. It will keep us from our meeting till to-morrow."

"That it shall not, if I can help it," thought Draukovitch; and then he went inside and reported to Olaf, whom he found in the grand sa-

loon, extended on a sofa, with all the lazy dignity of a man at home.

It cost the proud Russian officer a severe internal struggle to salute this "nobody," as he called him, but he did so, and delivered his letter, which Olaf perused attentively.

It was very brief, merely some directions, thus:

"Twelve at night—two whistles—enter—guide will show you—clear road."

CONSTANTINE.

Draukovitch would have given worlds to know what was in it, but the young swordmaster gave him no opportunity to inquire. Calmly, and as if such missives were matters of everyday receipt, he lighted a cigar with the twisted letter, and watched the flames turn it into black ashes before he said a word.

Then Draukovitch observed:

"You do not treat his highness's letter with much respect, it seems to me, count."

He laid a spiteful emphasis on the word "count," as if implying a doubt of Olaf's right to the title, and the swordmaster looked at him with a peculiar smile.

"His highness and I understand each other," he said, dryly.

"So do you and Tekli Aga, it seems," sneered Draukovitch. "He says you're not going to fight—that it's put off."

"Who says it?"

"Tekli Aga."

"Then Tekli Aga is mistaken," said Olaf, rather grimly. "If the moon shines and nothing happens, we meet on Vassili Ostroff to-night, at eleven o'clock. I have a little engagement at twelve, so I must finish Tekli Aga in a hurry."

"You seem very confident," observed Draukovitch.

"Why not?" with a shrug. "I know his style already. I have seen it in Spain, where they have a saying that the 'swords are made of glass,' and must not be touched together or they will break. Has that police guard arrived yet?"

"No; at least Tekli Aga says not."

"Then oblige me by going to this Count Strogonoff, chief of police, and tell him that I am waiting for his guard, and that if he does not send it, I shall have the honor of calling at his office myself for an explanation."

Draukovitch bit his lip and colored high. He did not like the peremptory tone at all.

"Sir," he asked, "do you know that I am captain in the Imperial Guards and aide-de-camp to—"

The swordmaster's face became a little scornful as he waved his hand and interrupted:

"Do you refuse to obey my order or not? It is a matter of indifference to me, but his highness may think otherwise when I make my report."

Draukovitch bowed stiffly.

"If you put it that way, sir, orders are orders; but I think that such conduct is more like that of a bully than a gentleman." And the aide-de-camp glared furiously.

Olaf stared and then laughed aloud.

"It cannot be possible that you wish to fight me, my little lamb," he said, pleasantly.

"Why, it would not be allowed. Come, come, be reasonable. Draw your sword and try to hit me. I will promise not to hurt you."

Instantly Draukovitch obeyed, with peculiar spite, and delivered a furious lunge at the swordmaster, who was standing opposite to him, arms half folded, a mocking smile on his lips.

Olaf did not even draw to defend himself; but just as Draukovitch thrust, the swordmaster shrunk his body to one side with a rapid motion, and caught the wrist of the aide-de-camp with one hand as the ineffectual point of the sword glided harmlessly by his own body. To be sure, the sword went through his hanging pelisse, but that did not save Draukovitch. The rapid, nervous clutch of the swordmaster, taking his wrist at the very close of his lunge, added so much to the impetus that he was thrown forward on his face, the sword being snatched from his hand as he went.

How it was done, he could not tell; but there he was on the ground, and there stood Olaf, with a half-mocking smile on his face, holding the sword by the blade.

"You see, Draukovitch, my little lamb," observed the swordmaster, quietly, "it would not be fair for me to fight you. I have been fencing for ten years. Please take your sword and go where I told you."

Deeply mortified, but with enough sense to avoid a repetition of the same scene, the aide-de-camp rose, sheathed the sword Olaf offered him and left the room, when the swordmaster indulged in a hearty laugh, all by himself.

Then he resumed his cigar and began to pace the room in silence, watching the setting sun till it sunk below the horizon to the room of the evening gun.

Just as this happened, a knock at the door was heard, and Tekli Aga entered the room with a respectful salaam, to inform him that the police guard had arrived.

"Good," said the swordmaster, animatedly.

"And where is Draukovitch?"

Tekli Aga smiled. The count would not come in, but had requested him to report.

Olaf laughed.

"He is foolish. He cannot stomach a defeat."

What, does he think it a disgrace to be beaten by a professional, and he only an amateur? Well, let him go. Where has he gone?"

"Back to camp," replied the Circassian.

"Very good, Tekli Aga; and now to arrange our little affair," continued Olaf. "What weapons do you prefer?"

"This," and Tekli pointed to his saber, proudly.

"But before we begin I have a secret to impart to you," continued the swordmaster. "Will you keep it on the faith of a soldier?"

Tekli bowed gravely.

"By the life of Mobammed, the Prophet of God, I will keep faith with thee, oh master of the sword."

"You are a follower of his highness, like me. Would you serve him, even at the risk of displeasing the czar?"

Tekli thought he would, and then Olaf told him of the mission with which he was charged by the grand duke, concluding:

"I would not tell you this, had not his highness informed me privately that I might trust you. We shall need all our forces to save the princess from the power of the police; and therefore, whichever of us is the best man should be the one to guard the lady. If I am wounded, take thou this letter and the whistle, follow my orders, and bring the lady through, for thou wilt be a better man than I."

"Good," said the Circassian, gravely; "I will do it."

Then he drew from his bosom a ring, set with a cluster of large diamonds.

"If I die," he said, quietly, "keep this. It came from the finger of Kouli Khan, the Tartar robber chief, who killed all comers till he met me. It is for the king of the sword. I will ask it back to-night at the sword's point. Is it good?"

"It is good," replied Olaf, gravely, but regarding the ring with great admiration. "Now let us go to our duties."

They spent another hour or two in attending to the orders given by the grand duke, putting the police guard in possession of the palace and seeing the horses of the Circassians made ready for the journey, besides finding one to replace Olaf's slain charger. No trouble occurred with the officer in charge of the police guard, for Count Strogonoff took excellent care not to be seen around the palace, and the lieutenant in charge was obsequiously polite to the swordmaster. The fact was that the reputation of Olaf had spread like wildfire through the Russian police in St. Petersburg, and they were mortally afraid of him.

The lieutenant was therefore agreeably surprised to find in the dreaded swordmaster a man of the most polished courtesy, who bowed at every second phrase and smiled in the most insinuating manner.

At last the preparations were all over, the little troop of Circassians had ridden out, headed by Olaf and Tekli Aga, side by side; and by that time it was nearly eleven at night, while the moon had risen about an hour above the horizon.

Then it was that Olaf said to Tekli:

"Send them on by the regular road. It is time we turned off for our little affair."

The Circassian bowed and addressed his followers in his own guttural tongue, directing them to pursue the regular route followed by the wagons.

Then the swordmaster and the mountain chief turned aside and crossed the long bridge to Vassili Ostroff.

CHAPTER XI.

THE DUEL.

OLAF IRON WRIST paused and drew rein under the walls of Dembinski Palace, in a solitary green spot, all surrounded with trees, just as the bells of St. Petersburg tolled eleven.

"Here seems to be the very place," he observed. "No one can interrupt us, if we do not make a noise and shoot. How will you prefer to fight?"

"As we are," replied the Circassian, eagerly, but Olaf shook his head.

"No, no, that would never do. We both carry pistols, and we should rouse the town shooting at this hour. We must draw our charges or we shall be tempted to use them."

Tekli Aga, with a proud smile, threw his pistols on the ground and drew his saber.

"I am ready," was all he said.

Olaf followed his example as far as the pistol went, but did not draw his sword.

"You have armor; I none," he observed, quietly. He did not seem to have any fear of being attacked by surprise; and he was right. He had taken Tekli Aga's measure correctly.

Impatiently the Circassian sheathed his saber and threw off his mail shirt and helmet.

"Are you ready now?" he asked, when he had completed his preparations. Olaf smiled and answered as he drew his sword:

"Come and take the ring, if you can."

Instantly Tekli Aga rushed his horse at the Dane, and commenced an attack of marvelous activity. His gray steed, slight-limbed and beautifully trained, wheeled around the other like a hawk on the wing, while the gleaming

saber flashed high and low, right and left, always threatening and never striking.

Round and round he went, striving to gain the left rear of the swordmaster, confusing him with false cuts to distract his attention, and always out of reach of a return stroke.

In reply, Olaf kept his own horse, a sober, steady beast, almost in one spot, wheeling on its haunches, while his sword, held nearly perpendicular, was thrust out to the full extent of his straight arm, his body crouched low in the saddle and leaning over to the right. By this simple means he showed the Circassian, wherever he went, a blade at right angles to his own, and meeting it at every turn.

In vain Tekli Aga turned; he could not get in, and at last he altered his silent tactics, dashed in, and began to fight like lightning, showering blow on blow with a cimeter as sharp as a razor.

Hitherto Olaf had been silent and wary, but as soon as the clash of steel on steel was heard, he laughed aloud, crying:

"No use, Tekli Aga. That is my best point. See!"

As he spoke, he parried a blow far away from his body, and with a turn of his wrist like a flash, caught the chief on the side of the face, slicing off a piece of his ear. Tekli Aga immediately wheeled his horse away.

"You cannot make a false cut before a master without paying for it," continued Olaf, calmly, as the other paused, a little way off, surveying him doubtfully. "Those eighteen that you killed were only boys, after all, Aga."

"You shall see if they were," cried the chief, fiercely. "Come down to the earth. Let us finish this."

"With all my heart," and the Dane leaped from his horse, following Tekli's example, both letting their animals run loose.

Then commenced a strange combat, in which the chief exhibited the most marvelous agility, leaping from side to side, and aiming cuts in the most reckless fashion, throwing his body apparently open at every stroke.

As before, Olaf was content to stand on the defensive entirely, wheeling on his left heel to meet the circles of his wily adversary, and permitting Tekli Aga to do all the work of assaulting.

He did not attempt to attack in turn, for he knew the school in which the Circassian had been trained, and that it was Tekli Aga's cue to risk a blow if he could give one effective cut of his own weapon in exchange.

Presently, as he wheeled round to face Tekli, his attention was caught by a surprising sight.

Behind the Circassian, and evidently coming on to seize both of them, were a number of men in police uniform, with drawn swords.

Instantly realizing the situation, he sprang back with a warning shout to Tekli, and both men found that they were face to face with a common foe.

A moment before they had been threatening each other's lives, and now, in a twinkling, they seemed to become friends, for Tekli sprang to Olaf's side and faced the police. The common enemy united them.

That sight caused a halt, though there were twenty men in the line, and Olaf whispered:

"They are too strong. We must get our horses."

Tekli uttered a low whistle, of peculiar intonation, and his own well-trained horse trotted up to him, when the Circassian sprang into the saddle.

In a moment he charged right into the midst of the police, cutting and slashing on all sides like a demon, and throwing them into confusion, in the midst of which Olaf ran at the line on foot, and cut down two of Strogonoff's men before they could realize that they were seriously attacked.

Then he heard the well-remembered voice of the "Man with the Whip," shouting:

"Surround them, pigs! Cut them down! Shoot them!"

"Ah, are you there again?" almost shrieked the swordmaster, as he rushed toward the voice. "Where are you?"

He saw before him the well-known heavy figure and dark face, but the "Man with the Whip" was mounted on Olaf's own horse.

The police had dismounted him a second time.

Even while he rushed toward the hated form of his enemy, the men, obeying orders, closed in behind him with a rush, and he might have been taken or killed, when down like a hawk came Tekli Aga, into the midst of his foes, scattering them once more.

"Quick! quick!" cried the chief, checking the plunging animal an instant before him, and the nimble swordmaster was not slow to comprehend him.

With a bound, learned years before in the military gymnasium at Copenhagen, he vaulted up behind Tekli, and away went the gallant charger, double-weighted as it was, out of the meadow.

Strogonoff, as soon as he saw them coming, put spurs to his stolen horse and fled, an example followed by his police.

As they passed the place where they had thrown down their fire-arms and Tekli's armor, they saw that those articles had disappeared,

and at the same moment that they observed this fact, the crack of a pistol and the whistle of a bullet warned them that the enemy were not yet quite routed.

Almost at the same minute the clock began to strike twelve, and Olaf remembered his mission.

"Quick!" he said, to Tekli Aga. "We must find the princess. Ride for the wall."

Bang!

A second shot whistled between their two heads, and the horse galloped on to the wall, where they halted a moment in the shadow, while Olaf fumbled for his signal whistle.

Before he could find it came a third shot, better aimed than the rest, and the Circassian's horse reared and plunged with a motion that told the bullet had struck.

Tekli Aga uttered a cry of rage and wheeled his horse to charge the police again, but at that moment Olaf found the whistle and sounded his two notes.

Instantly the grating of bolts was heard, and once more the wall opened right beside them.

The police saw it too and uttered a loud yell, rushing forward, when Olaf, by main force, succeeded in mastering the arms of Tekli Aga and turning the horse once more to the opening.

Crack! crack! crack! went a little volley of shots, and then Olaf felt the horse going down under them, just as they entered the mysterious opening. Instinctively he and his companion leaped off, and found themselves in the garden, just as the huge slab of masonry, revolving on a pivot, that served for a door, swung to.

It was not destined to close, for the dead horse lay in the way and blocked it, and both men realized their danger as they saw the police come rushing toward the wall, shouting triumphantly.

"Help me," cried the swordmaster, pulling at the head of the horse; and they did their utmost to drag the body out of the way; but before they could quite accomplish their purpose, the foremost man was nearly up to the wall, and Olaf cried:

"Keep the passage with thy life. I will seek the lady."

Tekli Aga nodded without a word, slipped behind the door, and stood with his keen saber ready to strike at the first comer, while Olaf turned away and ran to the house, full of anxiety for the safety of his master's runaway match.

The policemen, seeing no one before the opening, imagined that both men had fled, and rushed heedlessly on.

The foremost jumped over the dead body of the horse only to come on the sword of Tekli Aga, which laid him, a headless corpse, on the ground.

That stopped them in a hurry. They heard the dull sound of the blow, and saw the flash of the sword. No one followed. That was enough.

Meantime Olaf ran on to the house, and found not a soul visible till he came to the other side. There he met a man standing with some horses, of whom the young Dane breathlessly asked:

"The lady! where is she? there is danger!"

"There is always danger," replied the man, in a haughty tone, and then Olaf perceived he was speaking to a nobleman of rank, from his dress. He was grayheaded, and spoke sharply. "You have wasted time with your follies, you. The gate is out of order. Who blocks it?"

"My comrade's horse, shot by the police," said Olaf, dryly.

"Then they will enter the garden," angrily exclaimed the old noble. "We are ruined."

"Not so," answered Olaf.

"Why not?"

"My comrade is Tekli Aga, and he keeps the gate. Get the lady out; give me two extra horses and we are safe, once out of this."

"Upon my word," angrily exclaimed the other. "And do you expect Prince Dembinski to leave his palace open to the visits of police spies?"

"If he expects his daughter to be grand duchess, yes," replied the Dane, bluntly. "Come, my lord, we waste time; where is the lady?"

"Here, father," said the sweetest voice in the world, and there was the Princess Natalie beside them. "What is the matter?"

"The matter is that the south gate is blocked open, and the police are waiting there," he replied, angrily.

"Then it must be closed," she said, decisively. "Why not help this gentleman do it?"

"If my lord will do so, all danger will soon be over," added Olaf, and the old prince slowly followed him to the blocked gate, behind which waited the Circassian chief, grim and inflexible, with his drawn saber.

CHAPTER XII.

THE ROAD BLOCKED.

How to get the horse out of the gateway was now the question. The door had swung halfway to, operated by the hidden machinery in the house, and the animal's body was jammed between the wall and a slab of masonry weighing about eight hundred pounds, revolving on an iron pivot.

So much of the mechanism could now be clearly seen in the moonlight; also the fact that the edge of door and wall were made of polished

stone, curved in segments of circles, so as to allow of perfect fitting.

Then Olaf said to Tekli:

"Come, let us charge them."

In a moment more the two swordsmen dashed out of the opening like tigers and flew at the nearest policemen, who were watching in a circle by the door.

The attack was so sudden and unexpected, while the dread inspired by the two men was still so overwhelming, that an immediate stampede was the result, the first to fly being Strogonoff himself.

The comrades did not chase them far, but immediately returned to the entrance and found it wide open.

Seizing the horse they were about to drag it outside, when the old prince angrily exclaimed:

"Fools, what are you about? Do you want to leave a mark for the police to find the door to-morrow? Drag it into the garden."

They obeyed and accomplished their task in safety, when of a sudden the great door swung to with another clang, and Olaf rubbed his eyes at the deception, for he could not tell for the life of him where the joint was to be found, so rough was the appearance of the masonry.

"Now then," said the old prince, hurriedly "we have no time to lose. You are the swordmaster, sir. Who is this?"

"My sworn comrade and true friend. Tekli Aga, chief of Circassians," answered Olaf, promptly. "Two men are better than one, if both are good men, and, as our duties are to fight, he will be useful."

"Very well, sir," answered the other, in his haughty way. "Follow me to the carriage. You will both have fighting enough, before you have done."

He led the way, and the two swordsmen followed in silence, neither much liking the old prince, but both obeying their orders.

In another part of the garden stood a traveling carriage of the Russian style called a *tarantass*, with three horses, and on the box sat two men.

"The man on the right is the guide," observed the old prince, in a low tone. "He knows the way and will follow the correct road. All you have to do is to ride after the carriage and fight any one who tries to stop you on the way."

"Shall we have relays of horses?" asked Olaf, doubtfully, as he looked at the carriage: for the horses, though very fine animals, looked too fat for a long journey.

"So the grand duke says," answered the old prince, with a shrug. "That is part of your trouble. You may have to force them out of the postmasters, like every one else does. That is your business. Come, it is time. Your own horses are here."

Two powerful, well-built animals stood beside the tarantass, and without more ado the two swordsmen mounted.

Then the prince whistled; the wall door opened again, and out dashed the tarantass into the hard road on the banks of the Neva, looking toward St. Petersburg.

No one was in sight, and somewhat to Olaf's surprise the driver turned his horses' heads to the long bridge and drove straight over it toward St. Petersburg.

It seemed to him, knowing only that the police had been shooting at them that very night, that this was a foolhardy proceeding, but he said nothing.

"My business is to obey orders and fight," he thought, and with that he settled himself into his saddle for a long ride, feeling already a little sore.

He had not been on a horse for six months before reaching St. Petersburg, and the best of horsemen are always chafed by a first ride. Olaf had been in the saddle in the morning and again at night, and had been going at a rapid pace all the time.

As he rode over the long bridge after the galloping team of the tarantass, he expected every moment to see a party of mounted gendarmes sally out to arrest them, for he did not know the state of affairs in St. Petersburg, nor the fact that the emperor did not dare to arrest any of his brother's followers openly for fear of exciting a mutiny and revolution.

Therefore he was quite surprised that they traversed the streets of St. Petersburg without molestation, and finally emerged in the open country to the south, in the midst of a great green plain scantily covered with woods of scrubby fir trees, through which ran a broad white track.

Olaf knew what the track was, though he had never seen it before, for he had observed the direction in which they had been coming.

He knew that they were on the Warsaw road, over which the train of the Grand Duke Constantine had passed that morning.

When this knowledge came to his mind, he began to feel quite easy, for he thought that as soon as he reached the train all danger would be passed.

Away they went for about two hours at a hand-gallop, till the fat horses in the tarantass were white with foam and panting as if ready to drop.

Olaf, who was a great horse-lover, noticed

this with alarm and rode up beside the driver, calling out:

"You'll have to pull up, neighbor, or your horses will give out and fall."

The guide, whom he had not hitherto observed, turned a pair of dark, glittering eyes toward him, and answered:

"Concern thyself with thy fighting, brother, not with my business. Yonder is the post-house."

As he spoke, he pointed to a twinkling light ahead, and almost immediately after pulled up his dripping team before a low thatched cottage.

"Get us horses—that is thy business, brother," said the guide, coolly. "Rouse the postmaster."

Olaf instantly obeyed, jumping off his horse and pounding on the door of the post-house in fine style, shouting the while. Presently the door opened and a sleepy Russian, in a night-cap, stood there, candle in hand, blinking.

"What do you want?"

"Horses—three—at once!" shouted Olaf, as if he was addressing a deaf man.

"Impossible to-night," answered the postmaster, with a yawn. "They are all out at pasture."

At that moment the stamping and neighing of more than one animal were plainly audible in the rear of the post-house.

Olaf was never a very patient young man, as all know, and the idea of a Russian presuming to try and brazen such a lie off to him, irritated him.

In a moment he had seized the Russian by the throat, tripped him up, flung him on his back, and was plying his Cossack whip lustily around the man's naked legs, shouting in his best Russian:

"Pig! Dog! Thief! Get the horses, quickly! Quick!"

He had heard that this was the only way to treat a Russian postmaster, and certainly it seemed so, for the man at once began to howl out:

"Mercy, general; I will get the horses, marshal; oh, your Imperial Highness, I will put them to at once! Oh! oh!"

He jumped up, still howling, and followed by Olaf, ran to the stable, in the rear of the house, where stood three horses all ready harnessed, according to the law.

Still in dread of the whip, the postmaster hurriedly led out these animals, and was taking them to the front, when they heard the bells of another tarantass coming up behind them.

While the postmaster still paused in doubt, up came the strange vehicle, followed by a Circassian on horseback, whose gleaming mail shone in the moonlight, and halted in front of the door.

"Horses, pig! Horses, quick!" shouted a stern voice. "We are in a hurry!"

Now, indeed, the poor station-master had cause to tremble. He had only three horses, and six were wanted.

He clasped his hands in dismay.

"What shall I do, your excellency?"

"Put our horses to, in a hurry," answered the swordmaster coolly. "We came first."

"But this is a government carriage," faltered the poor station-master. "See the Circassian."

"Put our horses to, and leave me to attend to the Circassian," was the quiet reply.

"How now, pig, where are my horses?" shouted the same rough voice, and out of the tarantass jumped a big Cossack officer, flourishing his whip.

"Put our horses to," said Olaf, sternly.

"Give me my horses!" bellowed the Cossack. The station-master fell on his knees.

"Oh, gentlemen, what can I do?" he ejaculated, piteously.

"Put in my horses, and I will see to this gentleman," said Olaf, angrily, with such a cut of his whip that the station-master, dreading immediate more than prospective pain, jumped up and obeyed the order.

Then Olaf strode up to the Cossack officer and observed, coolly:

"You make too much noise here. These are our horses. You will have to wait."

The Cossack, who was a very large man, looked down with contempt on the slender-appearing youth and replied:

"I am not used to waiting, sir. I never wait unless for a lady."

"There is a lady here," answered Olaf, unguardedly.

The Cossack's face lighted up, and he cried out:

"Oho! So we have found you, have we? Let us see this lady, as you call her."

He turned toward the tarantass, where the new horses were now being harnessed, and made a motion as if to go toward it. Instantly Olaf was in front of him, and the swordmaster extended his hand warningly.

"The carriage is private, sir. I cannot permit you to go near it," he said.

He noticed that Tekli Aga was watching the strange Circassian very narrowly, while he helped the poor frightened station-master to unharness and harness the animals. The quick-witted swordmaster scented a plot at once.

The Cossack looked at him as if amazed.

"Who will prevent me?" he asked.

"I will," and Olaf fell back a step and stood

lightly balancing from foot to foot, in what the Cossack did not recognize for a boxing attitude, ignorant as he was of pugilism.

"You!" The big man said no more, but raised his whip.

Instantly Olaf made a dart forward and sent in two rapid stabs, one with each hand, coming from the hip, and taking the unwary Cossack in the midst of the face, where they sounded like mallet-blows on wood.

It was not a question of parrying an assault: it was simply the delivery of two rapid blows at a big man who did not know what they meant.

He found out at once, for his legs gave way under him and down he came in a heap, knocked senseless by those two stabs.

Olaf did not even stay to watch him. He turned to the station-master and cried out:

"Now then, harness up quick. I've cleared the road of that man."

Hardly had he said it when the tarantass seemed to burst open, and out of it dashed at least a dozen men in uniform, clutching at him.

A moment later he was surrounded by foes, too close to be ward off, and was fighting for his life, shouting to Tekli Aga:

"Drive on! Drive on! Leave me!"

He had drawn his sword, and was cutting furiously round him, every now and then kicking away a fellow who clutched him from the rear, and soon had the satisfaction of hearing the rumble of wheels that told his orders were obeyed. He saw the tarantass dash off, and then he struck out with such fierce desperation that all his assailants bore back, as he dashed first at one, then at the other, keeping them apart to prevent himself being surrounded.

Then came the clatter of hoofs, and he saw the lances of a squad of Cossacks approaching from the same direction whence the tarantass had come. He realized that he was alone on foot, with at least twenty enemies near him, but that his charge was safe on the road under Tekli Aga.

"I surrender!" he suddenly cried, just as the Cossacks rode up and the big officer began to recover.

In a moment they had seized him.

CHAPTER XIII.

THE CZAR AND THE SWORDMASTER.

THE Emperor Nicholas stood at one of the windows in the summer palace, looking thoughtfully down into the great court-yard, when word was brought him that Count Strogonoff was in waiting.

"Admit him," was the eager injunction, and the chief of the secret police entered the room.

"Well, have you taken her?" was the question of the emperor, to which Strogonoff replied:

"Not yet, your majesty, but I expect the news every moment. We have taken her protector, that devil of a swordmaster, Olaf of Copenhagen, that they call Iron Wrist. She cannot escape my men much longer after that."

"Ah, then Tekli Aga did not kill the Dane?" asked the czar, rather languidly. "I thought he would not."

"On the contrary," replied Strogonoff, "the Dane would have killed the Circassian, had we not interfered at the moment they were most fiercely engaged."

"Indeed!" with a little more interest, "and what then, count? Were they taken together?"

"Not so, your majesty. The two became friends as soon as they saw my people, and fought us like devils, with the result of killing five of our men that night."

"Five!" echoed the czar, now decidedly attentive; "and what followed?"

"They got to the Dembinski Palace, and came out thence about ten minutes later, behind a tarantass, which contained the Princess Natalie, while her brother, Prince Ivan, was on the box by the driver."

"Prince Ivan!" said the czar, in a grating tone. "Very well, Prince Ivan, we will see where you end, in Siberia or on a throne. Go on, Strogonoff."

He was very pale and angry as he spoke.

"Well, your majesty, of course we might have taken them all here in the city; but your majesty knows that in such a case, riot would surely have followed, so I concluded it best to let them get away a long stage on the Warsaw road, and catch them at the lonely post-house near Psakof."

"You did right. Well?"

"Well, sire, it was necessary to send enough of a force after them to overcome resistance, so I dispatched Captain Chichagoff, the strongest man among the Cossacks of the guard, in a tarantass, loaded with soldiers, while the rest of his *sotnia* (company) rode behind. He came up with the party as they were changing horses, picked a quarrel with the swordmaster—"

"And killed him?" eagerly asked the czar.

"No, your majesty. The captain did not even get time to draw his sword, for the Dane knocked him senseless with a blow."

"Ah! had he a stick?"

"No, your majesty, the men say he did it with his bare hands."

The czar laughed scornfully.

"They had been taking too much vodka. Who ever heard of a man knocking another senseless with his bare hand?"

"Perhaps your majesty would like to see the man," here interposed Strogonoff. "My people were too many for him, and he surrendered just as the tarantass with the Princess Natalie drove off."

"Did the men follow her?"

"Yes, your majesty. Of course their horses were blown, and the others fresh, but they expected to overtake the fugitives before morning."

"Where is this swordmaster?" inquired Nicholas.

"In waiting to see your majesty, sire."

"Send him in. I should like to see what manner of man it is that kills my best men and frightens Count Strogonoff so roundly."

The czar spoke with considerable sarcasm, and the chief of police flushed a deep purple, as he realized that the czar must have heard of his humiliating flight the day before.

He bowed and left the room.

Very soon after, a guard of four soldiers with fixed bayonets entered the room, bringing the swordmaster with them within a hedge of four sharp points, constantly directed on him.

Besides this, his wrists were manacled together behind his back, so that it did not seem as if he were very likely to escape in a hurry.

As he entered the grand saloon, he held his head as erect and strutted along with an air as proud as if he had been walking into his own house.

He knew well enough, but pretended not to know, in whose presence he was, as he strode up to the divan in the middle of the room and threw himself down on it, exclaiming:

"Now stab away. I've gone far enough."

The four soldiers were aghast at his impudence, and one of them made a prod at Olaf with his bayonet, crying:

"Get up! Get up!"

In a moment the swordmaster had parried the thrust with a dextrous motion of one foot, sending the man spinning half round from the leverage of the kick at the end of his long weapon.

Then, ere the clumsy Russian could recover himself, Olaf had bounded up by an exertion of his back muscles, and was inside his guard.

With the same swift sidewise motion with which he had overthrown the policeman the day before, he gave one "buck" to the soldier's face with the top of his own head and sent the poor fellow flying, stunned and helpless, to the floor.

"Now by the head of King Olaf the Great!" he called out to the other three, "if you would only take off these irons I'll undertake to fight the three of you, single-handed, with this fellow's musket."

He was interrupted by the harsh tones of the Czar Nicholas, saying aloud:

"Then, by heavens, young man, you shall do it now, or be shot for disrespect to me."

Olaf knew well enough, as we have said before, in whose presence he was, the more so that Nicholas and Constantine were strikingly alike, but he pretended not to know as he strode up to the emperor, with his hands still bound behind him, and asked:

"Who are you, that one must respect you?"

He looked so menacing, with his head shaking from side, as if he actually were about to "buck" the Czar of all the Russias, that Nicholas started up and drew his sword, crying:

"Back, sir, do you not know your emperor?"

Instantly Olaf fell on his knees, with an expression of terror and repentance, admirably counterfeited, on his face, faltering out:

"Oh, your majesty, forgive me; I did not know it."

The czar was very angry, and called out to the soldiers:

"Come here quickly, fools. Would you let this roaring swordmaster assassinate the emperor at once?"

Very much frightened, they ran forward and were just about to stab the kneeling Olaf, when the czar cried:

"Fools! there is no danger. Take off his irons."

"Please your majesty, Count Strogonoff has the key," promptly replied the corporal in charge.

"Then summon him quickly."

The emperor looked down at the kneeling Olaf, who kept his face hidden in apparent humility, and said:

"They tell me that you are a great swordmaster and that you love my brother very much. I am going to see what you can do. Are you willing to be tried?"

Olaf rose to his feet and bowed profoundly before the czar, while he could hardly restrain a smile of glee. It was the very opportunity he had coveted and for which he had originally come to St. Petersburg.

"To fight before the czar is my glory," he said.

A moment later Count Strogonoff entered the room. He had not hitherto ventured to show himself before the swordmaster, bound though the latter was, for he had been completely de-

moralized by the ferocious pursuit of the Dane.

Now, however, in the presence of the czar, and seeing that his enemy was manacled, while three armed soldiers were ready to assist, the chief of police thought he might show himself.

The emperor looked sharply at both men as the minister entered the room, and smiled sardonically at the paleness of Strogonoff's face.

Then he looked at Olaf and beheld, to his surprise, no sign of recognition on the face of the swordmaster. The story of the "Man with the Whip" had already reached the palace, with variations, and the emperor maliciously hoped to see the swordmaster break out once more.

But Olaf gave no sign that he knew Strogonoff, and the czar ordered the latter to unlock the manacles, which he did with a very bad grace, trembling excessively.

No sooner had he done so than the swordmaster, with a low obeisance, inquired:

"May I ask a favor of your majesty, before I fight these gentlemen here? It is but permission to do a thing."

"And what is that?" asked the emperor, with a smile, for he saw that he had a character before him.

"It is that your gracious majesty will give me leave to throw this man out of the window," said Olaf, on a sudden wheeling round and catching the minister of secret police by the ear, which he twisted in a way to produce intense pain.

The czar laughed aloud as the tortured Strogonoff raised his hands to his ears with a loud cry and crouched to the ground with the pain.

"No, no, you savage!" he cried, not ill-humoredly. "Let him go instantly, I say."

Olaf let go his enemy in a moment and sprang back, watching him keenly, for Strogonoff was now at last worked up to the point of fighting. At least his paleness had given way to a crimson flush, and he said, choking with passion:

"Your majesty sees. What am I to do with this ruffian?"

"Please your majesty, let him take the musket of that poor fellow there and come at me with the rest," cried the swordmaster, eagerly.

Nicholas laughed again. The idea pleased him. Like his brother Constantine, he was devotedly fond of seeing combats, but, unlike him, he seldom engaged in them himself, from constitutional physical timidity.

"It shall be done," he said. "You shall go down into the court, Sir Swordmaster, and we will see if you are worthy of the title of master with all weapons. Are you ready for the test?"

"Quite ready, your majesty."

"Acquit yourself well. If you are killed, you are no loss to any one—only a Dane the less," observed the czar, cynically. "If you pass all the tests, I will make you swordmaster to the Czar of all the Russias."

Olaf started. The prospect was a brilliant one, and yet he reflected that to take advantage of it was probably to do treason to his benefactor, Constantine. Nevertheless, our sharp Dane determined to accept the offer openly, and to play his cards so as to help the grand duke without offending the czar, if such a thing was possible.

The emperor took his arm, and did him the honor to lean on it heavily while they descended the stairs to the great inner court of the Summer Palace, with its marble floor and fountains.

The three soldiers and Strogonoff were already there, all armed with muskets and bayonets, when Nicholas said:

"Now, swordmaster, run in and do your best. If you kill any of my men, it will be the worse for you. Take the sentry's musket from him."

He pointed to the stolid sentry at the entrance of the court, and Olaf sidled up to this unconscious person, who knew nothing of what was going on till he suddenly received a prod in the stomach from Olaf's elbow that caused him to drop his musket in a hurry. Before he could realize what had happened, the active Dane was bounding across the court to meet his four enemies, musket in hand, and then ensued the strangest contest ever seen—one man charging four.

CHAPTER XIV.

THE SWORDMASTER'S TEST.

OLAF IRON WRIST had this in his favor in the contest before him, that one of his opponents was thoroughly frightened before he began, looking on the Dane as a maniac. This timid individual was Count Strogonoff, on whom the grim humor of the swordmaster had produced a demoralizing effect. The Russian could not tell, as he advanced, what strange and horrible trick was about to be played on him by this "fiend incarnate," as he styled him.

The soldiers—big grenadiers of the Guard—were not at all frightened, but they were very much puzzled at the novel exercise. In those days bayonet play was but little understood, and the ordinary bayonet charge was a mere rush and scramble.

Therefore, the three grenadiers ran at Olaf,

all in a heap, while Count Strogonoff came more slowly behind.

As for Olaf, he sprang out a few steps into the court-yard, and waited for his adversaries, poised lightly on both feet, knees bent, the flat of the musket-butt on his right thigh, while his left hand supported the gleaming bayonet-point at a level with his opponents' eyes.

Down came the three in a heap with a wild hurral and in a moment, with an active side volte—a trick then quite new—Iron Wrist had evaded the clumsy rush and was behind the Russians.

There was a startled cry of pain almost at the same moment from the nearest soldier. With a sudden stab, as quick as a flash and as soon withdrawn, the active Olaf had pricked one man just behind the knee on the supporting tendon, and down he went, as if he had been shot.

In another moment the swordmaster had leaped away to the other end of the court to attack Strogonoff, who awaited him with comparative firmness, while under the emperor's eye.

Strogonoff turned deadly pale and made a desperate thrust at him, uttering a savage curse as he did so.

Clash!

The swordmaster's bayonet met his, with a slight shock, the butt of Olaf's musket still on the thigh, so that the whole force of the loin-muscles assisted the blow, while Strogonoff's musket was out at the end of his arm.

Away went the Russian's musket, and away went Strogonoff with it, spun round by that almost imperceptible parry as if he had been a child, and almost disarmed.

"Ah!!!" he shrieked in another moment; and this time he dropped his weapon, clapped both hands behind him and ran like a deer in spite of his fat, while the emperor roared with laughter to see the mischievous Dane prick him up from the rear.

Then round Olaf jumped again to face the two big grenadiers, who were almost on him.

Both stabbed almost simultaneously, and he gave a rapid double parry in the same nervous style, both men being spun round as easily as was the chief of police.

Then, while their backs were still toward him, he suddenly shifted his hold of his own gun, with a rapid whirl, bringing the butt to the front, and dealt the nearest man a tap, apparently quite gentle, at the nape of the neck.

Instantly the big grenadier dropped as if he had been shot, and Olaf was left with only one enemy.

The last Russian, nothing daunted, swung up his musket like a club, and made a furious blow at Olaf, who evaded it by a rapid leap to one side. Then the big man, seeing that his enemy retreated, began to swing the weapon round his head, and fondly imagined he was going to chase Olaf out of the court.

For several steps the swordmaster bore back, and then, just as the Russian missed a blow, he dashed in to close quarters.

This time the grenadier took a leaf out of the Dane's book—he leaped back to avoid close quarters. It was evident that he was quick to learn.

Olaf of Copenhagen laughed aloud.

"You are a good one," he cried, "but you are not a master yet. See here."

He threw up his musket with both hands, parried the next blow that came thrashing in, and before the Russian could recover himself sent the butt of his own piece, with a rapid thrust, right into the other's face.

The effect was immediate, the poor grenadier dropping on the pavement with a broken nose, more than half-stunned.

The swordmaster leaped back and whirled round as if to see who else was coming, but the court was cleared of armed enemies, while the sentry whom he had robbed of his musket stood staring, lost in wonder at the whole performance.

As for the Czar Nicholas, he made no secret of his admiration when Olaf came up and saluted, as if nothing had happened.

"You are indeed wonderful with the bayonet," he said, cordially. "Can you do as well with the sword?"

"Your majesty has only to try me and see," observed the Dane, proudly. "I have graduated with all weapons, even to the English fist-cuffs, that they call boxing."

"Is it true that you beat the Circassian, Tekli Aga, last night?" pursued the czar.

"No, your majesty."

"No!"

The emperor's face altered. He began to think the swordmaster not so great after all.

"I thought you had beaten him."

"It is not true, your majesty. Tekli Aga is my sworn friend. We fight each other no more. He stood by me in a fight."

"Then you *did* fight. Is it not so?"

"A mere trial of skill, sire."

"Well, well, who beat?"

"It was not decided, sire, when the police came in. We killed five of the villains."

"What, villains! Do you call my police villains?"

Olaf extricated himself from the difficulty with a bow and smile.

"Your majesty, as an emperor, of course has ministers; but the police are only their underlings, not those of a gallant gentleman like your majesty. All gentlemen hate policemen. They should go after the thieves and bad people, not interfere with the amusements of gentlemen."

The czar stared and then laughed.

"Upon my honor, Olaf, you are amusing. Well, who had the best of it when these 'villains,' as you call them, interfered with your amusement?"

"That is not for me to say, sire."

"Well, then, who was wounded?"

"Neither, sire. Tekli Aga had a scratch on the ear, but that was all. He made a false cut, and your majesty knows that a false cut cannot be made in presence of a master without a penalty."

"Very good," said the emperor, in a thoughtful tone. "You swordsmen are strange beings. You seem to love this Circassian."

"I do, sire, because he is the best man I ever met. He made me do my best to avoid a cut, and I did not dare attack him."

"So!"

The czar looked at him musingly for a while, and then suddenly roused himself to inquire:

"Well, Signor Olaf of Copenhagen, are you ready to enter my service as swordmaster to the guards?"

Olaf bowed low in acknowledgment, but then shook his head.

"No, sire."

The emperor started in amazement, and a deep frown crossed his brow.

"What do you mean? Do you *refuse*?"

"I crave pardon of your majesty, but I am already a swordmaster. I want to be an officer, on a par with colonels. The swordmaster of the guards is—I hear—only a lieutenant."

The czar's brow cleared.

"Oh, is that all? You want a better place. Well, I will create a new office. You shall be swordmaster-general, with the rank of colonel. Will that do?"

The Dane bowed still lower.

"I cannot sufficiently thank your majesty."

"Very well, count—you hold that title, I believe—"

"In Denmark, yes, sire."

"Very well, count, accompany me up-stairs. I need an officer who will go anywhere and do anything he is ordered. You are the man. Come."

And there was poor Olaf, of Copenhagen, who had entered St. Petersburg almost penniless, once more fallen on his feet, and already in high favor with both the czar and his brother.

The autocrat of all the Russias walked up stairs as he had come down, leaning heavily on the swordmaster's arm, and Olaf could not help smiling at the change in his position, as the guards saluted at every turn of the palace.

Arrived once more in the grand saloon, the emperor touched a hand-bell and ordered:

"Count Strogonoff—at once."

Presently, into the room came the minister of police, as pale as ever and horribly frightened, but outwardly firm. He remained by the door, bowing.

The emperor had thrown himself on a couch and said, languidly:

"Oh, come forward, count. I want you. This is Count Olaf, the new swordmaster-general. He and you have had some troubles in the past, I believe. Do you bear any animosity against the count for it?"

"On the contrary, sire," answered the minister, eagerly, "I should be only too happy to be friends with the count, did he not pursue me with such rancor."

"You hear that, Olaf?" asked the czar.

"I do, your majesty."

"Well, what do you say to it?"

"I say that this Count Strogonoff undertook to strike me—a noble of Denmark—in the open streets with a whip, and that only his blood can at last wash out the stain of that blow."

"You hear, Strogonoff? What do you say?"

"I say, your majesty, that I have bled already in three places from this gentleman's weapon, and that he ought to be satisfied."

"We have had no fair fight yet," said Olaf, in an obstinate tone. "When we have, I shall be satisfied."

"You hear, Strogonoff?" observed the czar, dryly. "This is a serious matter. I never interfere in these things between discreet gentlemen, who know how to avoid a public scandal. I fear you will have to give the count satisfaction or an apology."

"I will apologize with pleasure—" began Strogonoff, but Olaf cut him short.

"A blow admits of no apology. It must be defended. I could not fight you for any offense short of this, for I am a swordmaster, but a blow with a whip can never be atoned for, save by a fight."

"Very well, then," suddenly interrupted Czar Nicholas, rising, "it is time I had a word in here. Count Olaf, of Copenhagen, I charge you on your obedience that you shall not pretend to quarrel with Count Strogonoff till you have executed the commission with which I am about to intrust you. Sir, I am going to send you to Warsaw at once to my brother, the Grand

Constantine. How soon can you be ready?"

Olaf started into a stiff military position and saluted.

"At once, your majesty."

"Then remember that, till your orders are obeyed, you are to be at peace with Count Strogonoff. You understand?"

"Yes, your majesty."

"Count Strogonoff," pursued the czar, "you will take this gentleman to the stables, see that he is provided with two of the best horses, and that his outfit for this journey is complete, as a special messenger. He will start to-night. Count Olaf, you will report here at six this evening for your dispatches."

This time Olaf bowed low, and then followed the minister of police from the room.

Once outside in the corridor, he ran his arm through that of the astonished Russian, and observed, playfully:

"So we are to be forced comrades under his majesty's orders till I have carried my dispatches. Well, be it so. I can afford to wait, and in the meantime let me tell you that I begin to like you a little. Who knows? If you behave well, the time may come when I forgive you that blow. But you must be very good indeed."

Then the swordmaster smiled at him so sweetly, with such a wicked glitter in his eyes, that Strogonoff felt decidedly uneasy, and was much relieved when they came on the sentry at the entrance of the guard-room.

CHAPTER XV.

THE DISPATCHES.

ABOUT an hour before sunset, that same evening, Olaf, booted and spurred, stood before the czar, awaiting his orders for the road.

The emperor had in his hand a sealed packet, and some loose papers lay on the table beside him, with a small pile of gold.

"These are your orders, Colonel Count Olaf," said the czar, handing the swordmaster one of the papers. "You will find your route laid down therein, for all the road to Warsaw."

Olaf bowed low and took the paper. The title of "Colonel" sounded very pleasant to his ears.

"This will pay your expenses," continued the emperor, handing him the little pile of gold pieces; "and when you get to Warsaw, you will present this letter of credit to Baron Strelikoff, the banker, who will supply the funds for your return. You will ride post and deliver this package to my brother as soon as you arrive. If you are attacked on the road, you will defend the packet with your life, and destroy it if there is a chance of your capture. Do you understand?"

"I do, sire. Your majesty can count on me."

"You will remember, colonel, that these dispatches are private—to my brother alone."

"Yes, your majesty."

"His Imperial Highness and myself have been parted by a designing family of intriguing Poles," continued the czar, in a low tone; "and a letter may effect our union once more."

Olaf could hardly believe his ears. Was the dictator of all the Russians talking confidentially to him, a humble swordmaster?

It seemed so.

The czar looked thoughtful and gloomy, and sunk into a reverie for a moment, from which he roused himself to say, in a severe tone:

"You did very wrong to enter my brother's service, before coming to me first, colonel, and worse to aid that intriguing Pole to escape. Thank Heaven, she has been taken by this time, and is safe in prison."

Olaf was master of his feelings, so he did not start, but he shot a keen glance at the emperor under his brows.

He thought to himself:

"Poor Tekli Aga! So they have taken him, too."

Then he bowed low.

"Any further orders, your majesty?"

"None, colonel. A good journey. Be back as soon as you can."

"Yes, sire."

And Olaf left the room.

In the passage to the court-yard, where his horses stood, he met Strogonoff, hurrying in with a pale face, and saluted him politely.

"Good-evening, count. I am off."

But, to his surprise, the minister of police brushed by with an impatient curse, saying:

"Oh, get out of my way. I'm busy."

It was evident he had not recognized him in his preoccupation, for Strogonoff's face was pale and anxious.

Another time, Olaf would have resented this, but at the moment he was too much astonished, and before he had made up his mind what to do the minister was gone.

Then an idea suddenly flashed on his mind, and he ran to his horses as he thought of it.

"Come, Nicolai," he called to the orderly Cossack who had been assigned to him, and then he mounted in a hurry and set off at a gallop down the street.

"By the Lord of King Olaf the Great," he thought, "they have not taken the princess, and that fellow brings the news. Olaf, it is time to get away, if thou wilt to save the good duchess from prison."

Leaving him to pursue his journey, he set off low Count Strogonoff, who had been called and told of the emperor's edict, which he entered with the news:

"Sire, that she-devil, Natalie Dembinski, has escaped again. The Cossacks nearly killed her remaining guard, the Circassian, Tekli Aga, but she got away again."

The czar started to his feet with a passionate oath.

"And they call me emperor!" he shouted, his face black with rage, "and I have servants, and they do no better than this!"

And so saying, he lifted up his arm and smote the minister a violent blow on the face, under which Strogonoff crouched to the floor in a suppliant attitude.

Like many another Russian in those days he did not feel the ignominy of a blow, but merely feared its repetition.

The emperor seemed to be wild with rage. He had hurt his hand in striking down Strogonoff, and it made him more savage. He rushed to a table, picked up a riding-whip, and began to lash the poor minister, who on his part only crouched his head under his arms like a school-boy, and took it quietly.

A few blows seemed to recall even the mad czar to his senses, for at last he threw away the whip and cried out:

"Fool! dolt! idiot! Why did you tell me you had her? I have just sent my brother a consent to his marriage, if he resigns his claim to the succession. I thought she was here, under bolts and bars. And now—fool! You have made me show my hand! What can you do to repair this folly?"

White with fury and foaming at the mouth the czar was not a pleasant object to contemplate, but the minister had seen him in such moods, and had too much at stake to allow him to quail.

He suddenly looked up boldly.

"Give me the order, sire, and I will get back the consent. Who has it?"

The czar burst into a fit of sardonic laughter.

"You get it? Why, fool, I have just sent it off by Olaf Iron Wrist, the swordmaster. Can you take it from him?"

Strogonoff was deadly pale and trembling, but he spoke out boldly for all that.

"Give me the ukase, sire, with power to arrest any and all in Russia, save your majesty, and I will do it."

Nicholas looked down at his minister with some surprise.

"Why, man, he will kill thee. Thou knowest that."

"Not when I have my orders to take him," answered the chief of police in a tone of deep earnestness. "Your majesty thinks me a coward. Be it so. I will show your majesty that I am not afraid even of this swordmaster, if I have my orders to take him."

"Very well, then," said the emperor, quietly: "I will try you this time, and remember that your life hangs on your success. Fail to bring back either Natalie Dembinski or that packet, and Constantine has the game in his own hands. With him for czar you know well what your fate will be."

The minister of police rose to his feet and stood waiting in gloomy silence while the czar wrote a few lines on an emblazoned parchment, filling in the names and signing the authority.

When he handed it to Strogonoff the latter bowed once more, but said nothing, leaving the room in silence.

Once outside he hurried to his own headquarters and summoned his agents, with whom he had a long secret conference.

It resulted in sending out a general alarm on the Warsaw road by the semaphore telegraph (for it was before the days of Morse) warning the police officers as far as Wilna and Grodno that two parties on the road were to be detained as long as possible.

It was addressed only to the secret police, for Strogonoff did not dare to face the popular fury which he knew would follow the publication in St. Petersburg of the arrest of any of Constantine's suite.

The instructions were only to detain the travelers by pretext, and it remained for Strogonoff himself to arrest them if he dared when he got up to them.

This accomplished, the chief of police called for a *tarantass* and a strong escort of Cossacks, and set forth on his eventful journey about ten o'clock, when the moon had not yet risen and all was dark.

He knew that if his orders were properly obeyed he would certainly come up with the swordmaster in two days, and most probably in another day with the Princess Natalie.

After all, Strogonoff, if he sometimes gave way to fear, was no coward in the full acceptance of the term. He knew he was on a dangerous errand, and yet he persisted. The best proof of his moral courage is the fact that as he

rattled out on the Warsaw road he fell asleep in the corner of his *tarantass*.

Just as the chief of secret police quitted St. Petersburg by the south, Olaf Iron Wrist drew bridle at the Psakoff post-house and shouted for a relay of horses. The night had closed in, foggy and dark.

CHAPTER XVI.

THE FIRST STAGE.

IT was the same post-house at which the Dane had been overtaken the evening before that he now knocked, and he took care to make the summons loud enough.

The same stupid postmaster came to the door, but as soon as he saw the gleaming uniform of the swordmaster, he began to make obeisance.

"Mighty general, imperial highness, the horses are all ready. How many does your lordship require?"

"How many have you got?" demanded Olaf, for an idea had come into his head.

"Two complete sets, general—six horses."

"Out with them all—on the emperor's service," cried Olaf, and away went the postmaster as if he had been running a race.

Out came the horses, all ready, harnessed for a *troika* or *tarantass*, and the postmaster looked round for the vehicle.

"Take the harness off, Nicolai, and change our saddles," commanded the Dane; and Nicolai, a stalwart Cossack, trained to implicit obedience, followed the order in silence.

The postmaster stared in silence, but did not dare say a word, for Olaf stood close to him with a heavy whip in his hand.

No sooner were the saddles shifted than the swordmaster mounted his fresh horse and asked:

"How many more horses, and where are they?"

"Only four, your excellency, and they are out in the fields."

"Then drive these on, Nicolai. We shall want them on the road," was the cool reply, and the Dane set the example by waving his long whip and sending the whole batch of loose horses away at a gallop down the white road, through the fog.

The Cossack obeyed orders with the stolid air of a Russian soldier. "The czar's orders" covered everything in his mind.

Olaf Iron Wrist laughed softly to himself as he galloped on through the darkness and fog.

"They will not overtake us in a hurry this time," he thought. "We have all the horses, and by the time we have swept a few post-houses, we shall be out of danger."

He knew that loose horses will follow a herd for miles after they have been unsaddled for lack of ability to carry a rider, and that by changing from horse to horse on the route he would be able to go quite fast.

Therefore he did not attempt to husband the animal he was riding, but kept on at a good stiff gallop for mile after mile, the loose herd following him at the same pace.

Only the whiteness of the road enabled him to find his way, for the night was very dark and the fog was so thick that the trees of the forest were invisible till one almost touched them.

So he rode on for nearly an hour at the same rapid gallop, till he began to feel that his new horse was laboring heavily.

Calling a halt, he rode into the herd, and he and the Cossack changed their saddles in a hurry, after which they dashed on, nearly as fast as before.

The new horses acted as if they were quite fresh. But Olaf knew that they would not last as long as if they had been really fresh, and he was glad to see, from the faint white glow that began to light up the fog, that the moon was rising at last. It was two days beyond the full now, and he hoped that the fog would lift.

He did not want to miss the post-house.

Flogging and spurring hard at the new horses, he kept them at a rapid gallop for half an hour longer, and then shifted saddles a second time.

As he did so, the fog began to lift above the tree-tops, and he saw that he was in the midst of a vast plain, flat as a billiard table, and sprinkled with stunted trees, hardly thick enough to be called a forest, through which the road ran on straight as an arrow.

Far ahead of him a light was gleaming.

"Nicoloff post-house," observed Nicolai, the Cossack, with a nod in the direction of the light.

"How far have we come, then?" asked Olaf.

"Sixty-five versts," (about forty-six miles,) was the reply.

"Only that!" exclaimed Olaf, incredulously; "and from the city?"

"No, from Psakoff, colonel."

"That is better. You say it is sixty-five versts to that post-house. Come, it is time we were there. *Pushol*, Nicolai." (Come on, Nicholas.)

Then they were away again, galloping as hard as ever on the last pair of horses, which Olaf calculated would about bring them to the post-house.

As they went along in their mad career, the Dane noticed a little stone tower, away off to the right of the road, on a tiny swell in the plain. This tower was distinguished by a number of lanterns on the top, arranged on a framework, and these lights were moving about through the night in a very peculiar manner.

"What is that, Nicolai?"

"That?" grunted the Cossack. "Who knows? They say that the devil lives in those towers, or sends some of his imps there. They had no such black deeds in the old czar's time. They have one between every post-house, and sometimes two, all the way to Warsaw."

"But what for, Nicolai?"

"Colonel, I do not know. They say the czar talks through them, all the way to Warsaw, in a minute or less. But you wouldn't get a true Cossack to believe that, you know."

Olaf watched the queer-looking lines of lanterns waving about wildly in the air, and wondered to himself what it could mean. In those days even the semaphore telegraph was a new thing, and not much used, outside of France.

However, he rode on without thinking much about it, and very soon drew up at the door of the Nicoloff post-house with his six horses pretty well exhausted by their forty-mile gallop in two hours and a half, reeking with sweat and ready to drop.

"They won't be able to follow us very far on this road," observed the swordmaster with a grin, and then he swung himself out of the saddle, and rapped loudly at the door with the butt of his whip, but without effect for several minutes.

He knew that some one was in the house, for he had seen the light, but the person was evidently a sound sleeper.

Nicolai, the Cossack, jumped off his horse and came to his officer's assistance, shouting at the top of his voice and battering at the door with his feet, alternately.

At last Olaf, full of anger at the delay, uttered a savage imprecation in Danish, and fired one of his pistols up at the window where the light still shone so serenely. He smashed the glass.

Almost immediately they heard the sound of a grumbling, half-plaintive voice, and the shuffle of bare feet coming down-stairs.

It seemed that they were doomed to a repetition of former delays. But Olaf had not been in the czar's service six hours without learning a few things, and he soon showed his knowledge.

"Who's there, this time of night?" asked a surly voice, inside. "Go away, in God's name, honest people."

Bang!

Olaf had fired a second pistol through the door, and now he shouted, savagely:

"Open, in the czar's name, fool of a postmaster, or I'll burn your house over your head."

The bullet made a hole through the door, and they heard a startled cry from within, but the postmaster did not give way yet. They heard him shuffle up-stairs, howling all the way as if he was in pain, and Olaf realized that the Russian depended on the thickness of his door to defend him from a forcible entry.

"Come, we must give our friend a lesson," he said, to Nicolai.

The Cossack grinned, for he liked nothing better, and the two prowled round the house, till they came to the railed inclosure in the rear, used for stables.

"Here are the horses, excellency," observed the Cossack.

True enough, there were about a dozen horses, lean, scraggy brutes, in the corral.

"Why not take them and go, colonel?"

"Very true, Nicolai; we'll do so; but first I must chastise this impudent fellow. He must learn he cannot insult a Danish gentleman without paying for it. Take out a rail."

Nothing loth, the Cossack obeyed, and they went round to the front door, when a few vigorous prods sent the door flying from its fastenings, and revealed the station-master in his shirt at the head of the stairs, trembling with fear.

Olaf of Copenhagen dropped the rail, seized his whip, ran up-stairs and began to thrash the unfortunate Russian, who made no resistance when he saw the rich uniform of his assailant, but merely howled in a dismal manner.

"There, you rascal," cried the Dane, putting all his strength into a final cut. "You'll try to stop the officers of your emperor on public business, will you? Tell me quick, how many horses have you?"

"None, excellency, none," cried the Russian, in a tone of pitiful entreaty. "Indeed, I have not a horse fit for you."

"Liar! What are those in the stable?"

"They are all lame, general, sick, blind. Not one is fit to go out. All are at pasture."

"Well, I'll try them, anyway," and the swordmaster was as good as his word; for he rode off at a gallop, a few minutes later, driving all of the new lot of horses before him and leaving behind him only the exhausted horses from Psakoff.

As he galloped away, he noticed, not fifty yards from the post-house, another of those

stone towers, and the lanterns were swinging away in the wildest fashion.

Olaf looked at it a moment and then far ahead. He saw another set of lanterns, up in the air, a few miles further on, and, like the others, these lights were swinging about.

Then it flashed on his mind in a moment that he was being signaled about.

He contrasted the treatment he had received at the post-house with what the emperor's orders led him to expect, and his acute mind at once jumped to the right conclusion. Then, too, he suddenly remembered that he had heard of, although he had never seen, a telegraph.

And if the delay at the post-house arose from the message signaled ahead, the tower in front of him was probably already warned of his coming. What was to be done?

CHAPTER XVII.

THE TELEGRAPH.

MORE than a hundred miles further on the road to Warsaw, that same night, the tarantass that contained the Princess Natalie Dembinski, on her way to join her lover, was halted before another post-house.

About ten miles beyond the place where Iron Wrist was riding on, the household and baggage of the Grand Duke Constantine had gone into camp.

At least three hundred miles ahead, thanks to rapid posting, the grand duke himself, with the immediate officers of his personal suite, were rolling along on the road to Warsaw, having left the saddle for the tarantass as soon as fatigue compelled them to sleep. Constantine was a man who lost no time on the road.

Just as Olaf started on his gallop from the Nicoloff post-house, Tekli Aga, pale and weary, his head bound up, his arm in a sling, and otherwise in a general condition of dilapidation, rode slowly toward the camp of the duke's baggage, coming from the direction of Warsaw.

If Olaf could have seen what was going on at these same places at the same time, he would have been puzzled to account for it. He knew Tekli Aga must have been in a fight and got the worst of it, but he did not know that the princess had gone a hundred miles further under the sole guidance of her brother, without an escort.

As it was, at the moment when he galloped off, another station-master, a great Hercules of a Cossack, was just informing Prince Ivan Dembinski that he "could not have any horses that night, perhaps not the next day. Who knows? God is great and the czar is far off."

So that the irate young prince, not being big enough to thrash the postmaster himself, was obliged to put up with the delay for the night at least, little suspecting that the swaying arms of the semaphore had already conveyed the injunctions of delay as far as they had traveled. The mist had prevented the transmission of intelligence in the early part of the night, but as soon as the fog lifted, the signals flashed along with the utmost rapidity, and the short half-hour in which Olaf had changed saddles for his last ride had given time to his relentless foe, the secret police, to get ahead of him.

Much of this he suspected, but he trusted to his luck to carry him through, and dashed along at full speed.

An hour's sharp riding brought him in full view of the red glare of camp-fires, which told where the train had gone into camp for the night, and he was sorely tempted to turn aside and ask after the fugitives.

However, he felt that to do so would be imprudent, as well as disobedient to the czar's orders.

About the last he did not much care, for he was so much infatuated with his early patron, the Grand Duke Constantine, whom he looked on as the very mirror of chivalry, that he was willing to abandon the emperor any moment to please the grand duke; but he reflected that to ask in the camp would be to expose Constantine's secret to Draukovitch, who was there, and he had a sort of instinct that the aide-de-camp was not to be trusted. Therefore he galloped on, full speed, past the cheerful glow of the camp-fires, which never looked so ruddy and pleasant as they did now to his tired eyes, and pretty soon saw, ahead of him, a solitary horseman coming slowly down the road.

Increasing his pace, he rode to meet him and soon recognized the Circassian Chief, Tekli Aga, evidently in bad plight.

For the first time in his journey Olaf pulled up to halt in earnest and eagerly inquired:

"Well, what is it? Is she safe yet?"

"The lady is safe at Luitzen by this," returned the Circassian quietly. "The Cossacks got at me, but my horse was too good and led them a chase. I killed three, but a lance struck me on the head, and one of the cowards fired at me and made a hole in my arm, here. You'll find them all along the road, with horses used up. Where go you?"

"On, to help her," replied Olaf briefly, and gathering up his reins.

"God keep you. Take care of the Cossacks."

was the answer, and then Olaf galloped off down the road on the way to Luitzen at the same wild pace at which he had come. He was pretty tired already, for riding sixty miles at a fast gallop, no matter how many horses a man uses, is hard work; but Olaf Iron Wrist was also worthy to be called Iron Heart in his constitution and pluck, so he galloped on the same as ever, changing horses as he went, till he came to the next post-house, some twenty miles further.

He did not pause here, for he knew that the horses he had would last him to the next station, and he judged that the loss of time would be more than equivalent to the gain of horses, if he stopped.

The next post-house was only ten miles off, and he changed horses twice on the last stage, riding up to the door with Nicolai on a pair comparatively fresh.

As he came up to the door, three horsemen were there, whose long lances showed that they were Cossacks.

In a moment he realized that these must be the men who had set on Tekli Aga.

As he thought of this, he also remembered that his pistols were unloaded, for he had fired them off at the last post-house and had not reloaded them.

He reflected, however, that his position was now very different from what it had been the night before. He was no longer nominally a dependent of the grand duke, but swordmaster-general to the czar, a title implying a good deal of power.

He rode up to the door and found it wide open, the postmaster conversing with the Cossacks.

As he approached they all looked up, and he took the initiative:

"What are you men doing here?" he inquired, in the angry tones of an officer of rank with a sharp temper. "What are you doing away from your barracks, and where is your officers?"

The Cossacks seemed to be amazed, for they saw before them an officer of authority in a rich uniform, and followed by one of their own comrades, a "red Cossack" of the Guard.

"Honorable father," began one, "we have lost our officer at the hands of a devil of a Circassian, and—"

"Then what are you doing here?" he interrupted, as roughly as possible.

"We were trying to get a feed of grain for our horses, little father."

"Then get out of here. *Poshli von! Poshli von!*" and Olaf began to swing his whip to drive them away. Nicolai unconsciously aided the deception by crying:

"Go, you pigs, you long-eared donkeys! Have you no sense? This is the colonel swordmaster-general, with dispatches from the czar himself. Away!"

So the Cossacks shrunk back humbly enough. They were not in the secret police, and knew not of the semaphore message.

"Now, station-master," cried Olaf, roughly, "out with all your horses in a hurry. A man who rides with dispatches rides fast. Out with them all quickly, or I will know the reason why."

But the station-master had been warned, and in a moment began to make excuses—with the utmost respect it is true—but still to make excuses.

"Where are the horses?" demanded Olaf, sternly, cutting him short.

"We have none, general; they are all out in the fields."

"Liar. The law obliges you to keep one set always harnessed. Thrash him out, Nicolai."

Nothing loth, Nicolai began to flog the station-keeper, who only danced and howled, while he protested that he was telling the truth.

"Take us to the stables, then."

"Certainly. Your excellency shall see for yourself."

And the man led the way to the stable. Sure enough, it was empty.

"Where are the horses?" asked the swordmaster, and as he spoke he also began to flog the poor Russian, who between Nicolai and Olaf danced and howled in good earnest.

"Where are the horses? Quick!"

Seeing that it was no use to prevaricate, for the swordmaster and his orderly were beating him so severely that he feared for his life, the poor postmaster yelled out:

"Mercy, general! Oh, your excellency, your highness, I will tell. They are out on the plain, but I can call them in with the horn for you. I had to turn them out. Count Strogonoff has sent orders—"

"That will do, Nicolai," interrupted Olaf, as he desisted. "Call in your horses quick. So it was Strogonoff's order, was it?"

He said this in a musing tone while the now contrite station-master was getting the horn.

Then the horn blew and the trampling of hoofs was heard. Up came at least twenty young horses, running at full speed to get their oats.

Olaf laughed for joy to see them.

"Now, Count Strogonoff," he thought, "stop me if you can."

CHAPTER XVIII.
CLOSE RACING.

Just about noon of the next day, the post-house at Luitzen was the focus toward which a good deal of excitement was converging.

The big Cossack postmaster stood leaning against one of the door-posts, smoking his pipe with the most perfect nonchalance, while before the door stood a tarantass to which the servant of the Dembinski family was harnessing the same three horses which had brought them there the night before. The animals looked thin and drooping, for they had been driven hard, and their rest at the post-house had not done them much good. The station-master had refused to provide them with oats, on the plea that he had none, and young Prince Ivan, though he knew this to be false, had not dared to say so, being alone. Now he stood by the carriage, looking very gloomy, while the lady in the tarantass was pale, and had evidently been crying.

As soon as the harnessing was finished, the prince got on the box with the driver and made his adieux as bitter as he dared.

"Good-by, postmaster. I'll remember you for this when I get to Warsaw, and if the Grand Duke Constantine does not see you removed and punished, I am mistaken."

The big Cossack grinned impudently.

"Good-by, *butushka*, (little father), and if you see the grand duke, it will be because the police are all fools. I know my orders."

The prince ground his teeth in impotent fury and drove slowly away. He knew from the bold demeanor of the Cossack that he himself was in danger, but hardly knew as yet in what the peril consisted.

Just as the tarantass drove off, a man emerged from the semaphore tower about fifty yards in the rear, and came up to the post-house.

"Well, Andrei Ivanovitch, we kept them a good long time. They will not get to the next station before night, and by that time the count will be here. Where are the horses for him, by the by?"

"All safe in the sunken stable to the rear. I know my business, Karlovitch."

"Another traveler is coming along. I saw him through the telescope just now. He has a Cossack with him and a number of loose horses. He is riding post. It is the second party, Andrei, the troublesome one. I did not think he could have got this far."

"He will be no trouble to me," observed the big Cossack, stretching himself. "He has gone as far as he is going to-day, if he wants horses."

As he spoke, he peered up the road, and sure enough, a dark body was rapidly advancing.

It looked as if it might indeed be a herd of loose horses, driven by two men.

But Andrei Ivanovitch saw something else besides the herd of horses. Far away beyond them was a dark spot, also advancing, and the practiced eye of the station-master saw that it was a tarantass.

"The count has overtaken him," he observed. "It can be no one else, for the orders were strict to give no horses to any one till he had passed. How he must have driven, to be here now!"

The telegraph-man looked a moment, and then ran to his tower.

"You must get out the horses now," he said, as he left the station-master.

The big Cossack immediately left the post-house and went to the rear of the semaphore-tower, where a little hillock appeared on the plain. It was the brush roof of one of the half-sunken stables common in Russia, and entirely hidden from view from the road.

Had Ivan Dembinski possessed the boldness of his former protector, Olaf, he might have gone there and found the horses, for there were no less than nine animals, all ready harnessed, standing inside munching their oats.

The station-master went into the stable and peered out through a hole. He saw the first traveler, an officer in brilliant Hussar dress, accompanied by a red Cossack of the guard, dash up to the door, his herd of loose horses all covered with foam and dust, and peer out eagerly on the road ahead.

"There they are, Nicolai," he cried, in a cheery tone. "We are in time. Now, where is that postmaster, I want to know?"

"Perhaps you can wait a little to find out," muttered Andrei, with a grin of satisfaction.

"He must be in the stable behind the tower," Andrei heard the Cossack say. "I know the old rascal. He used to be in my *sotnia* (troop), and he was always a shirk."

"Now the curse of Ivan the Terrible on thy head, Nicolai Androvitch," muttered the postmaster, as he heard his old comrade express his opinions. "If we are to have a fight for it, let's see who wins. The count is coming."

"Lead on to the stable, then," cried Olaf, gayly. "We have smoked out five postmasters already. Let us see if the sixth is any better."

"You shall see," muttered Andrei, wrathfully, and he picked up a big staff, as long as himself, from the corner of the stable, as the swordmaster swung himself off his horse and came toward the tower, followed by Nicolai.

Presently they met at the stable door, and Olaf demanded, fiercely:

"What are you doing here, lazy postmaster? Do you know an officer of the czar when you see him? Quick! All your horses! Strip them at once. I am on orders from the czar, with dispatches to his imperial highness at Warsaw. Do you hear? Out with them!"

"How am I to know that you are on orders from the czar?" demanded the big Cossack, sullenly.

"Here they are," responded Olaf, displaying his *podoroshnaya*, or order for horses.

"That may be all well, but other people have the same papers; and I have orders to give no horses to any one till the chief of police comes."

"Nevertheless, you will give me yours at once."

"How will you make me?"

"I will kill you if you refuse."

The big Cossack ran out and began to whirl the pole round his head.

"Go away, robbers!" he shouted. "I'll teach you to come and bully me."

Instantly Olaf drew a pistol.

"Drop that staff, or I fire."

The Cossack's only reply was a scornful laugh, and Olaf again remembered that his pistols were empty.

Andrei Ivanovitch rushed at him with the staff, and instantly Olaf changed his tactics. Suddenly shifting his grasp to the barrel of the pistol, he hurled it at the Cossack with such force that it struck him in the forehead and knocked him senseless.

"Quick, Nicolai; lead out the horses," he cried, as he stooped to recover the weapon, and then he calmly proceeded to reload his pistols, while Nicolai obeyed his orders.

Only taking time to saddle two, and leading the rest, still in their harness, the resolute Dane resumed his rapid gallop after the tarantass of Natalie Dembinski.

Before starting, he looked back and saw, far away in the rear, the other tarantass, which he already suspected to be that of Strogonoff, coming rapidly on.

"By the head of Olaf the Great, that count is a good one," he said to himself, in an admiring way, for he adored energy even in a foe.

He began to respect this chief of police, who had followed him in spite of all the obstacles he had thrown in his way.

A short quarter-hour's gallop brought him up to the Dembinski party, where he was welcomed with an extravagant joy that told how much relief he brought. The princess burst into tears, while Prince Ivan forgot all his haughty ways and fairly hugged the Dane.

"Now at last we can go on again," he cried. "Oh how we have suffered since you deserted us!"

"I did not desert your highness," answered Olaf, a little stiffly. "I was taken prisoner and brought before the czar, but I left one as good as myself behind to protect you."

"But he deserted us, too," protested Ivan, who was a selfish youth.

"He beat off your pursuers and gave you another start," retorted the Dane, sharply. "A man can only fight his best, and Tekli Aga got a lance-wound and a pistol-hole for your sake. Come, my lord, let us get on. Strogonoff is coming behind us."

"But our horses are not fit to travel."

"Is it so?"

Olaf saw that the prince spoke the truth, and in a moment was off his horse, together with Nicolai, unharnessing the jaded beasts and putting in three of the fresh ones that he had so unceremoniously taken from the last station.

As he finished he looked back and saw that Strogonoff's tarantass was already near the Luitzen post-house.

"Now, my lord. Whip and spur is the word."

Suiting the action to the word away flew the tarantass at a wild gallop, so different from the slow rumble of a few minutes before that the Princess Natalie brightened up and smiled.

Poor girl! Her face had been very white as she thought of the fate in store for her, had she been overtaken by Strogonoff.

The knout first, even though she was a woman, and then—if she survived—Siberia.

Such a fate was enough to blanch the cheeks of man or woman in those days, when the word of the czar meant life or death, as his whim dictated, and when the only relief from oppression was in the grave.

But in the rapid rush of air past their cheeks as they sped along at full gallop with the knowledge that every step took them further from Strogonoff, the knout seemed to fade from Natalie's imagination.

At intervals Olaf would look back for the chief of police, and had the satisfaction to perceive that the tarantass had not stirred from the station.

His clean sweep of the horses had been effectual at last.

In less than an hour they were out of sight of Strogonoff, and kept along at the same burst of speed till they arrived, after a change of horses, at another station, midway between Luitzen and Postavly.

Here, somewhat to their surprise, they had no trouble in getting horses, the postmaster coming out in the most obsequious fashion and furnishing them with a change for the tarantass and two for the riders, showing them at the same time that his stables contained no more.

Olaf, being of a naturally suspicious nature, had an idea that all was not right here, but as he could not define what he feared, he said nothing and went on.

Nothing happened to confirm his suspicions till they were at least fifteen miles from that station, and the same distance from Postavly. Then on a sudden, one of the horses in the tarantass stumbled and nearly fell.

Almost immediately after it stopped and went dead lame, holding up its forefoot.

Olaf dismounted to examine the hurt. A bitter exclamation of anger escaped his lips as he saw that the horse had stepped on a caltrop.

"And what is a caltrop?" asked Natalie, in a tone of wonder as he made the announcement.

"Look, gracious madam."

He wrenched away the torturing spike and held up the diabolical implement to her sight.

It was a ball of iron, with four spikes set on it at such angles that one was always upright.

"Oh, heavens! Who has done this?" she asked, with pale face.

"No one but soldiers use caltrops. The engineers make them to stop cavalry. Some one set that trap for us, and it was an officer of troops—or—"

He paused a moment.

"Or police."

"What shall we do?" asked Prince Ivan, once more disturbed in mind.

The swordmaster shrugged his shoulders and frowned with an expression of anger.

"We are not beaten yet," he said. "Stay here while I go back and search."

He had only a few steps to go to the place where the horse had trod on the caltrop. As he had suspected, there were several more, in an irregular line across the road, and the only wonder was that none of the other animals had been lamed by them.

The poor beast that had been staked was the shaft-horse, on which the others depended, and it was clearly impossible to go on in the same condition.

"The honorable gentleman will have to go in the tarantass with the lady," said Olaf; "and then we will put my horse in the shafts, while I get on the box."

This promptness of resolution was one of the traits that marked the Dane, and in which he contrasted most forcibly with the rather timid and irresolute Prince Ivan Dembinski. In a few moments the change was effected, and then the tarantass went on again at the same tearing gallop, Nicolai, the Cossack, riding ahead and keeping a sharp watch for more caltrops.

They had not gone a full mile further, when Nicolai signaled danger, and they pulled up in front of a wire carefully stretched about knee-high from the ground.

"Oho!" said Olaf, with a grim smile, "our friend Strogonoff begins to be in earnest at last. We must be getting near his Highness."

He dismounted from the box, traced the wire to its origin, and found it fastened to a tree at one end, while the other was tied to a suspicious-looking black box, half buried in the earth.

"We will leave that for the next comer," quoth the swordmaster; and he led the animals in a circuit all around the wire.

It was a long and troublesome job, for the track was so much obstructed by trees that he had to go at least a quarter of a mile, and the operation took nearly half an hour on account of the many stops. At last it was safely accomplished, and away they went again at the old pace, Nicolai still riding ahead.

A mile further on, the Cossack waved his hand as they emerged from a patch of woods, and before them they saw the steeples of Postavly, half buried in foliage, not three miles away.

CHAPTER XIX.

COUNT STROGONOFF.

At the moment that Olaf caught sight of the steeples of Postavly, Count Strogonoff drove up to the station where the postmaster had been so unusually civil to the fugitives.

The chief of police looked worried and anxious, for the unexpected success of the swordmaster in overcoming all the obstacles he had put in his way had a very depressing effect on the nerves of the minister of the czar.

As he drove up to the station, his horses were all white with foam and ready to drop, for he had been compelled to wait at the last post house till fresh animals could be brought in from the fields, and had had to drive them mercilessly to make up for lost time.

"Well, how long since they passed?" was his eager question, as the postmaster ran out.

"An hour ago, but the instructions of the gracious count are obeyed, and ere this they are stopped, if not blown up by the torpedo."

"Did the telegraph man forward the instructions to Postavly?"

"Yes, gracious nobleman."

"Send for him, at once."

"He is here, noble sir."

And at the word, the telegraph man came running. He had been the first to see Strogonoff.

"When did his Highness pass through and where is he now, if you know?"

"The gracious Grand Duke Constantine changed horses here, yesterday, two hours past noon. I shall have to signal the inquiry to find where he is now, gracious nobleman."

"Do so, quickly, while they change horses."

Away went the operator, darted into his tower, and presently the arms of the semaphore began to move, first in one uncouth shape, then in another.

The chief of police lay back on the pillows in his tarantass and went to sleep.

He was completely tired out with his long and rapid journey, although he had had more or less sleep, and every moment of waiting was too precious not to be utilized.

While he slept, the horses were changed (for the wily postmaster had taken good care to send for new ones as soon as Olaf drove away), and the creaking of the semaphore arms was the only sound that disturbed the stillness.

Presently the telegraph man came to the side of the tarantass and woke Strogonoff.

"Honorable sir, they send word back that his Imperial Highness slept at Wilna last night, and only left at noon to-day. He is still on the road between Wilna and Grodno, where he is to sleep to-night."

"Have the fugitives entered Postavly yet?"

"The Postavly operator signals that he sees them coming, and that Colonel Grapovitch has been appealed to for a squad of Cossacks to stop them."

"Good!" said the count in a tone of exultation. "They have given us a long chase but I think we have them now. Drive on at once."

"Your excellency forgets," interrupted the postmaster, "that there are obstacles. Let me advise your excellency to take an outrider that knows them."

"Come yourself," answered the impatient count, and then away went the tarantass at a tremendous pace, the station-master galloping after it as hard as he could go.

Thanks to the efforts of that skillful pilot they turned off at a side road before they came to the dangerous places, and so escaped all the perils into which the fugitives had fallen.

At last, to them too, the spires of Postavly came in sight, and the minister of police slept no more. He knew that his game was near, and that in all probability it would turn to bay very soon, for he was fully aware that his dreaded foe, the swordmaster, had joined the fugitive party.

Now was the time for Strogonoff to show what he was made of. He had told the czar that he would arrest Olaf and take from him his dispatches if he only received his orders.

Would he dare to do it?

The minister of police was now very pale and sweating profusely. Nevertheless he went on. He had resolution enough to conquer his fears in Olaf's absence.

Would he do as well when he met the swordmaster face to face?

The time was at hand to prove him.

He drove on into the market-place of the town of Postavly, and there was a group of Cossacks around a tarantass, while the splendid figure of the swordmaster could be seen, sitting on horseback before the carriage, just as it started out from the post-house.

Olaf looked round as the tarantass of the chief of police rumbled into the square. He wore a proudly defiant look, as who should say: "Stop me if you dare."

Strogonoff, livid and sweating, rose to his feet and called out to the Cossacks:

"Arrest that man, in the czar's name!"

CHAPTER XX.

THE TWO SWORDMASTERS.

WHEN Olaf, the swordmaster, arrived in Postavly, he found that the route led through the center of the little town, the post-house being in the market-place; and Ivan Dembinski evinced great fear as they entered the square, at seeing an officer with a squad of Cossacks, sitting on horseback in front of the station.

"We are lost!" he ejaculated. "They have orders to arrest us."

"One is never lost so long as he breathes," responded Iron Wrist, sententiously.

Then they drove up to the station.

"Horses, quick, for the service of his imperial majesty. I have dispatches for the Grand Duke Constantine and must overtake him," cried Olaf.

"Not so fast," was the response of the Cossack officer, in a tone of irony. "Fine feathers do not make a captain if he lacks a commission. Who are you, my young friend?"

The officer was a large, portly man with a big red mustache, and he was evidently disposed to look with contempt on the boyish face of Olaf.

"I am Colonel Count Olaf Svenson of Copenhagen," returned our hero, proudly, giving for the first time his surname. "I am swordmaster-general to the czar of all the Russias, and

acting under his majesty's orders. Behold my instructions."

And he drew forth the emblazoned parchment given him by Nicholas, and displayed it before the eyes of the Cossack.

To his surprise the other only laughed scornfully.

"I have heard of you for an impostor," he said. "The police telegraph has sent your description. You stole that paper, and the real Count Olaf is still in St. Petersburg."

In a moment Olaf had leaped to the ground and came up to the Cossack officer.

"Do you deny I am Count Olaf?" he asked, with his peculiar smile.

"I know you are not. You are merely an impostor."

"Indeed?" replied the Dane, with a still more polite smile. "Then you should be able to prove it on me. I have heard that you Cossacks think you can use a sword. Get off, and I will show you if I am Count Olaf or an impostor."

With an angry laugh the big officer swung himself to the ground and faced Olaf.

"Fool!" he cried, "do you know that I am Demetri Soltikoff, swordmaster of the Twenty-seventh Pulk?" (regiment.)

"So much the better," answered Olaf, with the same engaging smile. "I should be ashamed to fight an amateur, but as you are a professional it is all right. Be pleased to draw, Lieutenant Soltikoff, and I will show you that I am swordmaster-general and that you are a bungler."

The other Cossacks looked on in wonder. The brilliant uniform of Olaf impressed them with a sense of uncertainty as to his status, even after the words of their own commander, and they were too fond of a fight to interfere, even in the market-place, between two officers.

Lieutenant Soltikoff immediately drew his saber. He honestly believed the truth of Strogonoff's wily message, which indeed was well calculated to veil the true state of affairs and secure Olaf's arrest.

The chief of police was constantly trying new plans, and the nearer he came to the Grand Duke Constantine, the greater became the danger if he revealed the truth. In the inflammable state of the country, any revelation of an attempt to arrest a *bona fide* follower of Constantine would have been the signal for a disturbance and the probable defeat of Strogonoff's plans. Still Soltikoff, however honestly he believed the message, was a good swordsman, and he realized, the moment that Olaf drew his saber, that he had no common adversary.

Instead of rushing on, he stood on the defensive. Olaf laughed at him and began to taunt him.

"If I am an impostor, why do you not advance, swordmaster of the Twenty-seventh Pulk?"

"If you are the swordmaster-general, it is your place to attack," answered the Cossack, cautiously.

Instantly Olaf stamped his foot and advanced on the Cossack, making a circular feint and throwing himself open, to tempt the other to cut.

The bait took, for Soltikoff made a furious blow at the Dane's left shoulder.

In a moment it was parried, and with a quick turn of the wrist Olaf laid the other's right cheek open.

It was a light slash, but it angered the Cossack to see his own blood drawn so easily.

With an angry curse he sprung back, and then made a desperate thrust in tierce at Olaf's breast.

Bang! Clash!

With a sharp downward blow Olaf struck the saber almost to the earth, and with a second blow, slanting up, sent it flying over the heads of several Cossacks.

"Well, Soltikoff, am I an impostor?" he asked, fiercely, for the clash of swords always put up the Dane's blood.

The Cossack looked completely crestfallen.

"My lord is no impostor: he is fit to be swordmaster to the czar," was his answer. "I apologize."

With a grim smile Olaf drew out his handkerchief and wiped from his blade a few drops of blood.

"Then I trust to you to see that we do not want for horses," was his comment. "This lady is a dear friend of the Grand Duke Constantine and I am escorting her to him, besides obeying my orders. You are a soldier and understand these things."

The Cossack was perfectly transformed. No sooner did he find that he was in the presence of a real master, than he became eager to do him every possible service; for he adored the members of his own craft in exact proportion to their superiority to himself.

Hastily stanching the blood from his cheek by holding his handkerchief against it, without trying to bind it up, he began to hector the postmaster for his delays, and in a few minutes had a fresh change of horses out, with an additional span to lead behind.

At Olaf's demand, he was also supplied with a saddle-horse; and it was just as they were all ready for departure that Count Strogonoff

drove up and electrified every one by his imperious order to "Arrest that man, in the name of the czar."

Here was a fresh quandary. Ivan Dembinski, who had just begun to breathe again, turned pale as he recognized the minister.

Lieutenant Soltikoff was honestly puzzled. He did not know what to do. He recognized the minister of police, but he had gone too far in Olaf's favor to recede at once.

"Why, count," he said, in a deprecatory tone, "this is the colonel swordmaster-general, under orders from his majesty—"

"Fool," interrupted Strogonoff, angrily, "do you not know me?"

"Certainly, count, but—"

"Do you know *this*, then?" asked the minister, producing his parchment. "Here is an order, filled in by the emperor's own hand, commanding all persons to obey my orders. Arrest that man!"

The lieutenant looked still more puzzled. He recognized the new order, but he also had seen the old one.

"But this gentleman has an order, too, count."

"Stolen from its proper possessor, Count Olaf. I tell you this man is an impostor, and the woman is nothing more than—"

"Stop!" suddenly shouted Olaf, riding up to the side of the tarantass. "One word against the lady, and I will chastise you in public."

As he spoke, he glared at Strogonoff in his own peculiar fashion when he chose—a look that had caused brave men to shrink before that.

The minister of police turned paler than ever, but commanded his emotions.

"I call on all here to help me arrest this man for treason to the czar," he cried, appealing to the bystanders.

"Whip up, Nicolai; I will follow," answered Olaf, cutting short the colloquy. "Let a man offer to stop you, and he disobeys the order of the czar."

The stolid Nicolai instantly obeyed, and the tarantass with the Princess Natalie rolled away, while Olaf drew his sword and reined up before the minister's carriage.

"Lieutenant Soltikoff," he shouted, "as swordmaster-general, and your superior officer, I order you to take your men back to the barracks. Do you belong to the army or the police?"

"To the army, colonel," responded the Cossack, promptly.

"And are you going to obey my orders or those of this gasconading police minister?"

"I swear, colonel, I don't know what to do."

"Then take your men back and leave me to the police. Let this Strogonoff arrest me if he dares. You hear my order, sir?"

The swordmaster had struck the right key, for the lieutenant saluted.

"Do you take the responsibility, colonel?"

"I do, sir. Be off."

Instantly the officer of Cossacks wheeled his horse and rode off to the barracks followed by his men, leaving Strogonoff in the market-place, pale with rage.

Olaf rode up to the tarantass, shook his sword at the minister and said, fiercely:

"Now, sir, follow me if you dare."

Then he sheathed his sword, wheeled round and galloped away after his party.

Strogonoff, left to himself for a moment, sunk back on his pillows, pale with conflicting emotions. He had failed again.

But the minister of police was not quite beaten yet and soon showed it.

"Put in fresh horses," he commanded.

Then he added, in a loud, bitter tone, so as to be heard by all the idlers who had congregated round them to stare:

"You people of Postavly will be sorry for this. I will teach you what it is to disobey the orders of the czar when I come back from Wilna with that man a prisoner. We will see if he will fool Colonel Platzoff as he has fooled your men here. Put in those horses quickly."

The station-master, glad to get rid of the conflict of authorities, hurried in the new horses; and a few moments later Strogonoff drove out of Postavly in hot pursuit of the escaping party.

He saw the tarantass about two miles ahead of him on the road to Wilna, and gave orders to his servants:

"Keep them in sight, but do not press them. Our fight will come at Wilna."

CHAPTER XXI.

WILNA.

It was late that night and approaching the morning when the Dembinski party entered the town of Wilna.

Olaf and his faithful Cossack had at last given way to fatigue and were fast asleep, one on the box of the tarantass, the other in the vehicle itself, while Prince Ivan and his servant had taken their places on horseback. The selfish and haughty young prince had only consented to this arrangement when he saw that his protectors were actually sinking under their exertions, and after Natalie—clearer-headed than her brother—had insisted on the change.

All danger seemed to them to have passed; at least they had no more trouble about getting horses, all the way to Wilna.

So long as Olaf and Nicolai kept awake and

Daylight lasted, indeed, the danger had been much lessened; but during the night, and while these faithful guardians slumbered, their relentless pursuer, Strogonoff, had not been idle.

At the last station before reaching Wilna he had sent a long message to be signaled by the lanterns of the semaphore through the night, and, that dispatched, ordered his men to drive on faster, so as to enter Wilna ahead of the fugitives.

Had Olaf been awake this would never have happened, but in the darkness of the night, with a broad, open plain covered with short grass on which to travel, while Ivan Dembinski and his servant were fully occupied in trying to keep awake, the minister found it a comparatively easy thing to slip by, and dashed up to the Wilna post-house nearly ten minutes before the Dembinsky party arrived.

That ten minutes was fully utilized by the sagacious Strogonoff. His previous dispatch had warned the police of his coming, and he found a party of ten men waiting, armed with big sticks.

He gave his instructions rapidly and clearly.

"A party is coming up with a tarantass and two men on horseback. As soon as it arrives, rush out, pull the men off their horses, and beat them over the head with sticks till they are quiet. Then you will lead the horses of the tarantass into the stable of the post-house and leave the tarantass outside. Do not hurt the people in the vehicle. There is only a lady, and she is not dangerous."

That done, the wily minister ordered his own carriage to be taken away, while he waited for the new-comers.

It was not long before the rumble of wheels was heard, and they saw the tarantass accompanied by the two horsemen, coming up the street at a weary canter.

It halted before the post-house, and one of the horsemen rode up to the gate, where all was silent and dark.

"Horses, quick," he shouted, in an imperious tone; but before he had time to say more, half a dozen men leaped out on him, pulled him off his horse in a moment, and began to beat him over the head.

One short exclamation of fear was heard, and then only the dull thuds of the sticks.

The cry of the first victim was echoed by another behind the carriage, and the second horseman wheeled round and galloped down the street at full speed.

Then all was still, and the horses stood panting in the tarantass as Strogonoff came out to see what had been done by his myrmidons.

"Where are the men?"

"Here, excellency. We have the boldest one killed for your excellency, but the other ran away."

"Have the people in the tarantass been hurt?"

"No, excellency. They seem to be asleep."

Strogonoff advanced to the side of the vehicle and peered in. He could see a dark form at each end of the carriage, but there was not light enough to distinguish anything else, and the regular breathing convinced him that both people were asleep.

On the box lay a third figure, which snored so loud that there was no mistaking its character.

Quietly, and without any unnecessary disturbance, the tarantass was led away, but not to the stables. There was a police barrack at Wilna, with a walled court-yard and an iron gate. Into this inclosure the tarantass was drawn, the horses taken out and led away, while Strogonoff locked the gate and put the key in his pocket. Then he breathed freely.

"Now, my fire-eating friend," he ejaculated, triumphantly, "we have squared our accounts at last, I think. It will puzzle even Natalie Dembinski, with all her arts to get out of that place, and as for you—"

He suddenly started.

It occurred to him for the first time to inquire whether the man who had been beaten was really the swordmaster, or whether the Dane was the one who had escaped.

Impressed with a nameless fear, he went back to the scene of the first fracas, called for a lantern and examined the face and figure of the insensible man.

It was not the swordmaster.

It was not a Cossack, neither.

Count Strogonoff uttered a cry of surprise.

"It is Serjus Androvitch, the prince's coachman," he ejaculated. "Then one of the men in the coach must be the swordmaster or his Cossack."

No sooner had he conceived this idea than he became anxious to find out if it were true.

Quietly he went back to the barrack-yard, followed by his men.

"Be ready, when I give the word, to strike hard at the man I shall point out to you," he said.

The police officers grasped their sticks and nodded. They did not need to speak much.

Quietly Strogonoff unlocked the gate and threw it open, leaving the key in the lock.

"If this be the man I think, he is dangerous," he whispered. "He may beat you all. If he does, run out and lock the gate on him. If necessary, we will shoot him from between the bars."

The police officers began to look uneasy, but they followed their leader, nevertheless.

Quietly they approached the tarantass. Strogonoff lifted the lantern and peered in.

As he did so he uttered an exclamation of wonder. The tarantass was empty.

"Guard yourselves. The devil is unchained!" he cried, all in a tremble, and the next moment heard the click of the lock as the gates slammed to.

With a wild cry, the whole party rushed to the entrance and looked out.

Three figures, one of them a woman, were walking rapidly away, and turned the corner, out of sight, a moment later.

The minister of police was tricked again.

In a moment he comprehended that the quick-witted swordmaster had been shamming sleep, and had made his escape once more, under the cover of the darkness.

"But they cannot get away," he cried aloud, in his desperation. "Rouse the town, some of you. Is there no way out?"

"Yes, your excellency," said one of the men. "I have a master-key. They cannot get any horses, for the stables are locked."

"Quick, then; let us get out of this."

A few moments later they were out of the trap into which they had so foolishly run, and in full chase toward the stables.

But when they got there, the streets around the post-house were empty.

The fugitives were not within sight or hearing, and the clock of the great nunnery of St. Catherine struck three while they were looking around them.

"Rouse the police, all over the city, and search for them. It is only half an hour to dawn, and if they leave the city, I will break every inspector of police in Wilna," said Strogonoff, savagely.

Away went two of the men to the police barrack, and a few minutes later the alarm-bell tolled out its loud summons to the sleeping citizens of Wilna.

"Now, my bold swordmaster," cried the count, in a tone of triumph, "come forth when you please. I think you will not get out of Wilna as quick as you came in."

As the streets began to fill with armed men, it did seem indeed as if his threat was likely to be verified.

CHAPTER XXII.

THE CONVENT OF ST. CATHERINE.

HAD Count Strogonoff's vision been keen enough to pierce stone walls, he might have seen that Olaf Iron Wrist and the Princess Natalie were not so far from him when he made his boast.

The swordmaster and his faithful Cossack were standing in the little parlor of the great convent of St. Catherine, while a stout, comely nun, of venerable and dignified appearance, who had one arm around the Princess Natalie, was speaking to them.

"It is indeed most providential, Count Olaf, that you were able to get here, for the princess is quite safe till his imperial highness chooses to come for her in person."

The swordmaster bowed low before the abbess.

"It is true, your nobility, that the credit is not due to me. I was in truth sleeping at my post, and allowed the honorable lady to be taken. It was her own head that conceived the plan that extricated us. As for his highness, I know not how I shall dare to face him when I have to tell him that the Princess Natalie, his Pearl of Poland, as he calls her, is a prisoner."

"She is not a prisoner, my faithful servant," interposed Natalie, earnestly. "You have done all and more than any man living would have dared to do for me. I am as safe here as at home in my father's palace, and so much nearer to his highness."

"Then all that remains for me to do is to take horse and go on to his highness," replied Olaf. "Has the honorable lady any message for him—a letter—anything that will show him I have not abandoned his trust without orders?"

"You shall have the letter at once," she answered; "but you are surely not going on? The bell has been rung, and Count Strogonoff's men will arrest you."

Olaf gave a short, contemptuous laugh.

"Not with the czar's orders in my pocket," he said. "The danger for both of us was over, excellent ladies, as soon as the princess was safe from the police. They dare not stop me. If they try, let them beware."

"But you are too tired to go on. At least repose till the darkness comes," urged the abbess.

"Has your nobility any horses?"

"Nay, nay, how should a convent of holy women be furnished with horses?"

"Then your nobility sees that it is necessary we should depart," said Olaf, with another bow.

"Will it please the honorable ladies to prepare the letter for his highness?"

He looked so obstinate that both ladies realized it to be a useless task to try and stop him. Therefore they departed, and Olaf went to the window of the convent parlor to look out.

The bell was still tolling, and the streets were full of people in the gray dawn of morning. The convent window looked out on the principal

square of Wilna, on which the police barracks opened at one side, while the cavalry barracks faced it at the opposite end of the square. The church of St. Catherine and the convent occupied the third and fourth sides of the inclosure, while the post-house was tucked away, as it were, in one corner.

Out in the middle of the square stood by their horses a whole *pulk* or regiment of Cossacks, dismounted, while the commandant and his staff were in the middle of the square in a group, talking to each other in an excited way. Olaf could see the tarantass of Count Strogonoff with the minister on the cushions, near the commandant, and there seemed to be a hot dispute going on. A buzz of voices that was entirely opposed to the usual restraints of military discipline announced that a disturbance was on foot in the town.

Olaf smiled to himself as he looked, for he well knew the cause of the agitation. It was the mysterious disappearance of his party that had made all the trouble, and he well knew the jealousy between the army and the police that caused the grumbling.

"The commandant is scolding Strogonoff for rousing him out of his bed without just cause, and Strogonoff is explaining," he thought.

Then he called up Nicolai to the window.

"What regiment is that, Nicolai?"

"The Twenty-seventh *Pulk*, your nobility."

"Who is the colonel?"

"The Colonel Platoff, your nobility."

"Platoff? I have heard that name before."

"Exactly so, your nobility. He was once the tutor-in-arms of the Grand Duke Constantine, and his majesty, the czar."

"Why do you put the grand duke first, Nicolai?"

The Cossack colored deeply and stammered:

"Excuse me, your nobility; the soldiers all do that, for they love the grand duke."

"Will you take a note from me to Colonel Platoff, Nicolai?"

"I am here to obey the orders of your nobility," answered the Cossack, promptly.

Olaf sat down and produced from his sabretache, where he always carried them, paper and a pencil, with which he hastily scrawled a letter to the colonel of Cossacks.

It was simple and to the point:

"COLONEL:—There is a lady in the case, and the minister of police is a scoundrel, who wants to rob his imperial highness the Grand Duke Constantine. If you wish to earn the gratitude of his highness without incurring any responsibility, let your orderly lead the two best horses in the regiment up before the door of the convent, and do you look the other way for a while. Leave the rest to one of whom you must have often heard,

OLAF SVENSON,

(Surnamed Iron Wrist.)"

When this curious missive was written the swordmaster sent Nicolai off with it, and went to the window to watch.

The Cossack was no fool, and Olaf saw with satisfaction that he slipped out of a side door at the convent and into the square without being noticed among the other soldiers.

As he crossed the square, however, his scarlet uniform was so different from that of the other blue-clad Cossacks of the line, that he became the object of some attention, and as he approached the commandant all the officers stared.

A red Cossack of the Guard was not often seen outside of the capital.

Count Strogonoff noted him and eagerly cried out:

"There, Colonel Platoff, you would not believe that the impostor was here. Now he has the impudence to send—"

"How can he be an impostor, if this man is his orderly?" sharply interrupted Platoff, a stout, white-mustached old soldier. "I begin to suspect that there is something not right here, count."

Before Strogonoff could reply, Nicolai had advanced and stood before the colonel, saluting, as stiff as a poker, and holding out his letter. Colonel Platoff took it and read it in silence, after which he stuffed it into the breast of his uniform coat, and turned to Strogonoff. He was a man of the very type in which Olaf confided, fond of an adventure, and, like all the army officers in those days, secretly inclined to wish that Constantine would raise a rebellion in favor of his own claims to the throne.

"Count Strogonoff," he said, fiercely, "I believe you have deceived me, and that the gentleman whom you have been following is no impostor. At all events I am not going to keep my men under arms this morning to please you. Let your police arrest this Count Olaf, if they wish; I have other business."

Then he turned to his staff:

"Dismiss the parade, adjutant. Take my horses over by the convent door, orderly. I shall not want them for awhile."

He turned to Nicolai:

"Friend, whom do you attend?"

"Count Olaf, colonel and swordmaster-general to his majesty the czar, your nobility," was the proud reply, for Nicolai was too thoroughly a Cossack not to admire the officer on whom he waited.

"Very well; go over and stay by those horses till the count wishes for you," was the reply, and Nicolai quickly took the hint, and retired.

Then the trumpets blew and the hoarse orders of officers followed, amid which the orderly ranks of the Cossacks broke up, as the men led their horses back to the stable.

Count Strogonoff watched the whole proceeding, with great anger, and expostulated with the colonel, showing him his orders.

"You see, colonel, that his majesty expressly bids every one to obey my orders and arrest any one that I shall indicate."

"All very well, but you have indicated no one. I do not believe that your man is even in Wilna. I have not seen him."

"But there is his orderly before your eyes."

"That man is a Cossack of the Guard, on duty with some officer. You do not expect me to arrest him, surely?"

"I surely do, colonel."

"Very well. I am ready to do so when you show me that your police cannot do it. There is a whole battalion of them under arms."

Strogonoff turned angrily away.

"I see, you are like all the rest of the soldiers. You are not loyal to the czar. Very well, you will see what will happen."

The old colonel winked at his staff, as the angry minister drove off to the police battalion, and then calmly extracted a cigarette from his pocket, lighted it and proceeded to smoke.

Arrived in front of his own men, Strogonoff directed a scouting-party to patrol the streets and arrest any strange officer whom they should meet with a lady, and then told off a second party to watch Nicolai, with orders to arrest him the moment any stranger came up to him to join him.

In the meantime, from within the convent, Olaf had been watching the turn of affairs with decided interest and some anxiety. He had, for the first time in his journey, been obliged to trust to another person, and doubted whether that person would be faithful.

When he saw Colonel Platoff stuff the letter in the breast of his coat, send his own horses down to the convent door, and dismiss the parade, he felt a decided sense of relief; and almost at the same moment the Princess Natalie entered the room, with her letter to the Grand Duke Constantine in her hand.

"Thanks, gracious lady," said the sword-master, and he dropped on one knee to kiss that white hand as he took the letter. "If you will but look from the window for a moment now, you shall see me ride off before them all, a free man."

Natalie smiled admiringly at him in a way that completely won his heart.

"I begin to believe that you can go anywhere and do anything," was her reply.

Then Olaf once more kissed her hand with a warmth that was entirely unnecessary, and ran down the stairs.

As for the princess, she ran to the window in haste, for where is the woman who does not love excitement when she can see it safely?

She saw the square dotted with groups of people, the Cossacks filing away into the stables, and the dark-green ranks of the police still in their grim order on the opposite side of the square.

Below the window were two handsome horses in splendid equipments, which she knew must belong to officers of rank.

A Cossack in blue held both of them, and he was conversing familiarly with another Cossack in red, whom Natalie recognized as her late guardian, Nicolai.

As she looked, the dark ranks of the police broke up, and a number of parties were sent off in different directions, one of them coming across the square to the horses beneath the window.

Almost as soon as this occurred, she noted a sudden disturbance immediately below her. The brilliant figure of Olaf Iron Wrist, in his glittering uniform, suddenly ran out into the early red rays of the morning sun, just then flaming into the square, and rushed at the blue Cossack who was holding the officers' horses.

The man had his back turned to Iron Wrist, and it was but the work of a moment for the active swordmaster to dig his knee into the other's back and send him flying prostrate onto the hard stones.

In another moment, both Olaf and the red Cossack had mounted the officers' chargers, and were riding rapidly out of the square.

The police seemed to be so dumbfounded by the sudden apparition that they halted.

Then Natalie heard the hoarse voice of the minister of secret police shouting:

"Fire on him, pigs! A hundred roubles to the man that shoots the traitor dead."

In a moment there was a spitting volley, succeeded by a rattle of reports, and Natalie screened her eyes in terror.

When she uncovered them, Iron Wrist and Nicolai were gone.

CHAPTER XXIII.

IVAN DEMBINSKI.

It was true enough. The pluck and boldness which had carried Iron Wrist through so many perils had triumphed once more, and he was galloping away out of Wilna, a free man, as he

had predicted, the carbines of the police having missed him and his orderly.

There was nothing left for Strogonoff, if he wished to catch him, but to secure an escort of Cossacks and make the best of his way after him, which he was not slow to do.

Colonel Platoff affected to be very much surprised at the sudden appearance of the sword-master, and promptly acceded to Strogonoff's demands; but it took the adjutant an unconscionable length of time to make his details for the escort, and it was a good twenty minutes before the minister of police left Wilna.

Colonel Platoff's last words to him were more than half mocking:

"This Count Olaf seems to be a devil of a fellow, but if you can't arrest him with twenty men at your back you deserve to be sent to the czar as a subject for Siberia."

"You needn't laugh, Platoff. He has stolen your best horse," was the snappish retort.

"Horses are plentiful, brave men few," replied the colonel of Cossacks, mysteriously. "I don't grudge a brave fellow the loan of a horse."

Strogonoff said no more to the colonel, but before he went he called for the town inspector of police and gave him certain secret orders.

The result of these orders was that the nuns of the convent of St. Catherine found themselves in a close state of police surveillance that day, with men stationed in front of every door and window. When the abbess heard of it she told Natalie in some terror, but the "Pearl of Poland" was in nowise discomfited.

"I made up my mind to stop here when we first left Postavly," she said. "I knew you, mother, and I know also that no police dare enter this place. Let them watch. They will not see me, nor hear of me neither, unless your sisters tell."

But the nuns were stanch. The abbess was herself a Pole of the Dembinski family, a distant cousin of Natalie, and had been expecting her ever since the visit of the grand duke on the previous day. Though love affairs were foreign to her order, she would not have been a woman had she not cherished a love of intrigue and match-making, and the romance of Natalie's position appealed powerfully to her feelings.

Leaving them to concert their plans for further action, we must follow Olaf on his now unfettered quest after the Grand Duke Constantine.

"By the head of King Olaf, women are a great trouble to take care of, Nicolai," he observed, as they galloped along on the road to Grodno.

"Exactly so, your nobility. We shall come up with his highness to-morrow morning, now they are gone."

"I hope so, Nicolai. How shall we tell where he is?"

"Sergius Petroff, the man your nobility was so kind as to knock down, told me that his highness left Wilna yesterday at noon for Grodno, where he was to stop all night. If he does not leave the place till noon to-day, and we ride all night, we shall come up with his highness between Grodno and Bialystock. It is a very long stage."

"We shall, if we can get horses as good as these for all the way, Nicolai; but we mustn't kill these, or Colonel Platoff will have a right to be angry."

"Colonel Platoff cares nothing for a few horses, for he owns thousands, your nobility. His father was the great Platoff, Ataman of all the Cossacks of the Don."

"Very good. Then let us spur on."

They made the miles fly behind them for two or three hours at a hard gallop, and then saw a post-house ahead of them.

Here they obtained fresh horses without trouble, and left the others, with orders to send them back to Wilna, with Count Olaf's compliments to Colonel Platoff, and "the equipments should be returned as soon as they reached the grand duke."

As they galloped along once more they saw, far ahead of them, a slowly moving spot, which was developed as they advanced into a single horseman, slowly urging a tired horse over the road.

"Who can that be?" said Olaf, in a musing tone, and he was startled by the Cossack's prompt reply to his thought:

"That is the young Polish prince, your nobility, that ran away from us last night. His horse must have galloped all the way from Wilna."

Olaf uttered an impatient exclamation.

"More trouble! He is worse than a woman, for he will not keep still. I will not be bothered with him. We must ride past him."

"Very good, your nobility."

So they galloped on, Olaf striving all the way to harden his heart against what he knew would be the piteous pleadings of Ivan Dembinski.

As they rapidly overhauled him, they saw him cast one frightened look over his shoulder and then begin to flog his exhausted animal, which presently stumbled and fell.

As for Ivan, he fell partly under the horse, and began to shout so lustily for help that they

were forced in very shame to halt and assist him out of his predicament.

As soon as he recognized Olaf he began to cry out:

"Oh, what a terrible journey I have had since you deserted me at Wilna. They would not give me a horse at the post-house, threatened to arrest me for a thief—me, Prince Ivan Dembinski!—for a thief; and I had to gallop away to save my life. Where are you going?"

"To Grodno, and thence on till we find the Grand Duke Constantine," said Olaf.

"Then you must take me, too. Where is my sister?"

"In the convent at Wilna. We cannot take you. We have but two horses."

"Then the Cossack must dismount," said Ivan.

Olaf laughed at him.

"The Cossack can fight. I cannot afford to lose him. Good-morning, prince."

Then Ivan set up a piteous cry.

"I shall be taken and sent to Siberia. Here they come now. Look back, if you don't believe."

Olaf instinctively turned his head and saw in the distance a tarantass, surrounded by the lances of a Cossack escort. He uttered a cry of anger.

"So he is not yet satisfied!" he ejaculated.

"Come, I have spared this Strogonoff long enough. Now I will teach him what it is to interfere with Olaf Iron Wrist."

CHAPTER XXIV.

CATCHING A TARTAR.

As soon as Olaf saw that the minister of police was bent on following him into the presence of the grand duke, his resolution was taken. He could have defied pursuit but for the new and vexing incumbrance of the prince. He felt that he could not abandon the latter to possible arrest, and he made up his mind to a bold stroke.

Turning to Ivan Dembinski, he said:

"If I give you my horse, can I depend on you to ride to the next post-house and wait for me?"

"Yes," was the overjoyed answer.

"Then take him."

In a moment he had dismounted, and Ivan, needing no further advice, was galloping away as hard as he could go on the road to Grodno.

Nicolai, though completely mystified, said not a word, but remained stolidly awaiting orders. All that he did was to dismount and offer his horse to Olaf, who declined it by a wave of the hand.

Then both awaited the coming of the minister of police and his escort.

In about a quarter of an hour the tarantass dashed up and halted, the Cossacks forming a circle round Olaf, who stood perfectly cool before the bristling lance-heads and bowed to the chief of police with unruffled courtesy.

"Well," cried the minister, in hoarse tones of triumph; "so we have you at last, Sir Iron Wrist. Do you surrender, or must we kill you?"

"On no account think of killing me, count," was the smiling reply. "More hangs on my life than you think—your own in fact. My dispatches are safe. Yonder they go at full speed, under all the whip and spur the prince can give them. His highness will have them by noon to-morrow, and I shall have done my duty."

The minister turned pale with wrath and fear.

"What do you mean? Have you given up your dispatches? Your orders were to destroy them."

"If I could not deliver them. I could not in person, but they will reach his highness for all that!"

For one minute Strogonoff was dumb with rage and perplexity; then he shouted:

"Wretch, neither they nor you shall escape me. I will take this prince, now I have you safe."

"You have not me safe," replied the Dane, with the same winning smile. "Shall I tell the lieutenant here what you wish to do to the lady whom the Grand Duke Constantine—"

He had said enough, for he noticed that all the Cossacks showed marks of attention at the name of the Grand Duke Constantine, and began to lift their lances, while the officer in command looked suspicious.

Strogonoff saw it too, and realized that he must dissemble before the soldiers, till he could get among his own police, who asked no questions, but who also had no horses, except those at the post-houses.

"Well, what do you want? What was your object in stopping?" he asked, in a tone of less ferocity.

"Simply that you will dismiss your escort. If you wish to arrest me, here I am, but you need no escort with me. I will go with you to the Grand Duke Constantine, if you wish."

"That is fair," broke in the Cossack officer, in a harsh tone. "Colonel Platoff told me to see that you arrested the gentleman, and then to come back. Fours right about, men, march!"

"But you leave me alone with him and the Cossack!" cried Strogonoff, desperately.

"By no means. I will stay here alone," said Olaf, politely. "Here, Nicolai, ride on and wait for us at the next post-house."

Nicolai saluted and galloped away toward Grodno, while the other Cossacks, evidently glad to be rid of a disagreeable duty, turned back to Wilna, leaving Count Strogonoff with a single *yemtshik* or driver, and his servant, to deal with the swordmaster as best they could.

No sooner were the soldiers fairly out of hearing than Olaf observed:

"Now, my lord count, let me give you a piece of advice, which is to turn round and go home in peace, for I am resolved to be followed no longer."

"Get your arms ready, men," was the only answer of the chief of police, who was trembling violently, but who still retained his determination, thanks to that mysterious something behind him, called authority.

Olaf looked up and saw the driver reaching for his carbine, which lay on the box behind him, while the servant who sat beside him was taking his own weapon from his back. In a moment the Dane had covered the driver with a pistol and the stern command:

"Thrown down that carbine."

Like all spies, the man was not good for much at an open fight, and he obeyed in a ludicrous hurry, throwing the carbine to the ground, for there was something in Olaf's eye that warned him not to try to level his weapon.

The man beside him was also full of nervous excitement, and had got into trouble over the fastening of his gun-sling, when he too found himself covered by the muzzle of Olaf's pistol, while the swordmaster said:

"Come off the carriage instantly."

The man obeyed and came up to Olaf, who quietly cocked and fired off the carbine, slung as it was, up in the air.

He performed the same operation for the other weapon, Strogonoff looking on all the while in helpless rage, and then quietly stepped into the tarantass beside the minister.

"*Poshol, yemtshik*," (Go on, driver), he said, sternly, and then away drove the tarantass, with the swordmaster sitting quietly beside the chief of police, who was too bewildered at first to say a word.

The servant was left behind on the road, looking stupidly after the tarantass, and Olaf smilingly observed:

"Come, count, the question has hitherto been whether you should take me back to St. Petersburg a prisoner. Now you will please to come with me to Grodno, and if necessary to Warsaw, to see his highness."

"Insolent wretch!" began the minister, furiously. "Do you suppose that when we get to Grodno my police will let you escape?"

"Hush, if you please, not so fast," said Olaf, with a deprecatory lift of the hand. "Allow me to say in the first place that the expression 'insolent wretch' is inadmissible among gentlemen and that I require an apology for it instantly. Do you understand?"

The chief of police looked at the smiling face of the man beside him and his rage got the better of his prudence. He himself was stoutly built and at least thirty pounds heavier than Olaf. All of a sudden he threw both arms around those of the swordmaster, pinioning them to his side and shouted:

"Help me quick! Get the irons, Peter!"

The driver looked back and saw the situation.

The slender, fair-haired swordmaster was apparently completely in the power of the burly chief of police.

He began to pull at his horses and fumble in his pockets for the handcuffs.

Olaf on his part did not pretend to struggle. He merely observed, in a quiet way:

"Count Strogonoff, if you do not take your hands away you will be sorry for it."

The next moment the driver heard a dull thud, as of a blow, and looking round saw that the minister had fallen back into the carriage, pressing both hands to his face, which was streaming with blood, while Olaf was smiling as serenely as ever.

"As I was observing, count," he continued, tranquilly, "before you compelled me to give you the Danish *skäl*,* the term 'insolent wretch' requires an apology, which you will give me on penalty of another *skäl* in a moment."

Perfectly convinced that he might better leave this smiling person alone, the driver whipped up his horses again, while the minister of police sunk back into the corner of the carriage, crying:

"Anything but that. I will fight you, rather."

"Indeed?"

The question came in tones of pleased surprise. "Is it really true that you would rather fight me? I never dreamed that you would do me such an honor. Shall we begin now?"

"No, no, I have no weapons," was the half-stifled reply, as Strogonoff continued to nurse his injured face.

"Indeed? Then were you not foolish to come

after me? However, be it so. As you say, you owe me an apology or a fight for the term 'insolent wretch,' and we will have our little affair before the grand duke, when we overtake him."

"Ah, you feel confident because you are an expert, and I am only an amateur," cried Strogonoff, bitterly.

"Nay, nay, you shall not say that, my friend. I would not fight you at all, were it not for the old trouble of the whip. As it is, I will make the affair equal. I will fight you blindfold with the small-sword, your eyes being free. Is that sufficient odds to give you?"

"It must be, I suppose," was the sullen answer, and then they came in sight of the post-house.

Nicolai, the Cossack, stolid and patient as ever, was standing by the door of the post-house, holding his horse, but Ivan Dembinski was not to be seen.

"Where is the prince?" asked Olaf.

Nicolai grinned slightly as he saluted.

"The little gentleman would not wait for your nobility. When I came up, he was disputing with the postmaster about a fresh horse, which he could not get. The postmaster knew my uniform, and the little gentleman called on me to help him get a horse. I supposed it was all right, your nobility, and I helped him; but he no sooner got the animal than he galloped away at full speed."

Olaf laughed heartily.

"What a fool does fear make of a man," he ejaculated. "He will get no further than the next station, for they will not give him a horse without a *podorozhnaya* (order) or the sight of a uniform. Well, put in the horses."

The minister of secret police said not a word at this post-house, while the horses were being put to. The postmaster saw that something mysterious was going on, but did not dare to interfere without positive orders, and so the change was effected, and the tarantass rolled on once more.

Strogonoff lay back on the cushions in the corner of the vehicle, revolving new plans of arrest. He could not depend on soldiers, and the question was, how should he decoy his prey within the power of the police?

CHAPTER XXV.

GRODNO.

THE town of Grodno was all astir that afternoon, for the retinue of the Grand Duke Constantine was sojourning in the town, occupying the best rooms of all the large inns in the place. The garrison was full of excitement over the arrival, and the ladies of Grodno were all in a flutter, for it was announced that the grand duke was to spend the whole day in the town, to rest from his fatigues.

About an hour before sunset, his imperial highness was seated on the balcony of the Governor's house, smoking a cigar and looking down into the grand square.

Two troops of Cossacks were exercising there, and his highness was watching them with interest, for Constantine was, above all things, an enthusiast in arms.

The Cossacks were tilting at each other with headless spears, firing at bits of paper on the ground, and cutting up all sorts of similar antics, when the rapid gallop of hoofs and rumble of wheels was heard, and a tarantass dashed right up to the door of the Governor's house.

Constantine uttered an exclamation of surprise and alarm, as he noted the fur *kalpak* and white heron plumes of Olaf, the swordmaster.

He missed some one else beside him.

In her place were the dark, scowling features of the chief of secret police, Count Strogonoff.

Constantine Romanoff was trained to self-control, like all princes, therefore he said nothing, though his heart beat fast. He heard the sentries below challenging, saw the swordmaster and minister of police dismount from the carriage and enter the house together, and then his attention was attracted by a single horseman in plain clothes, who came galloping across the square all alone.

"Ivan!" muttered the grand duke to himself.

"But where is she? Some misfortune—"

He was interrupted by a violent squabble below. Ivan Dembinski was trying to force his way past the sentries, who were refusing him admittance. The sound of his excited voice was plainly audible above the growling tones of the soldiers.

"Tell them to let him in, Draukovitch," said the grand duke to his aid-de-camp. "I believe I know the gentleman."

A few moments later, the three men who had been following him in such a singular manner entered the room, all together.

Ivan Dembinski at once began to speak, but Olaf and Strogonoff merely pulled out bundles of papers and remained silently awaiting their turns.

"Please, your highness, I have been scandalously treated on the road hither," began Ivan, petulantly. "This man that you ordered to attend us, abandoned me, and I was compelled to flee to your highness for protection."

Constantine raised his hand softly.

"It is unnecessary to enlarge, prince. You

are here, and some one else is not. Is that person safe?"

"How can I tell?" asked Ivan, a little sulkily.

"How! Did you abandon her, sir?"

The tone of the grand duke was one of haughty amazement, and Ivan turned scarlet and stammered:

"I did not abandon her. I only escaped death by flight."

"Then where is she? A prisoner?"

"Ask him," and Ivan pointed to Olaf.

The grand duke turned round on Olaf with a look of stern inquiry, which was met by the Dane with perfect impassiveness. He merely saluted and held out his dispatches to the czar's brother.

Constantine took them and glanced at cover and seal, which bore the imperial arms.

"Where did you get these?" he asked.

"From his gracious majesty, the czar," was the reply, in a stiff military tone.

"Why, when did you see him?"

"The day before yesterday, highness."

"What!" cried Constantine, in a tone of surprise. "Did you not start when I ordered you?"

"Yes, highness."

"Then how came you in St. Petersburg the day before yesterday, sirrah?"

"I was taken prisoner, highness, and brought before his majesty, who was pleased to make me swordmaster-general and send me hither with dispatches for your highness."

The Russian prince looked at the Danish swordmaster for a full minute with a wide-open, threatening stare, under which Olaf never wilted a moment. Then he said, in a low, grating tone:

"So you have left my service."

Olaf cast one swift glance at him and made an almost imperceptible sign, which the quick-witted Russian understood in a moment.

"Very well," he observed, in a tone of pretended coldness; "I will answer your dispatches in time, Mr. Swordmaster-General. You can fall back."

Then he turned to Strogonoff.

"Well, count, what can I do for you?"

"I regret to say, your highness, that I come on a painful errand. His majesty sent me on with this special ukase, which your highness can read for yourself, to arrest this man Olaf and recall the dispatches sent by him. This man has defied arrest by exciting the soldiers to sedition, using your highness's name to make them disobey orders."

The grand duke smothered a smile under his heavy mustache and gravely replied:

"That is a serious case. Let me see the ukase."

He perused it attentively, and then observed:

"This gives you practically unlimited power. You might offer to arrest me under this ukase. What do you want?"

"The dispatches that this man has just delivered to your highness, who can perceive that his majesty has been pleased to change his mind as to their delivery."

"But they are delivered."

"Not till your highness has opened them, which you will not do."

"Why not?" demanded Constantine, sharply.

"Because to do so is high treason," boldly answered the minister, and he looked the czar's brother full in the face.

Constantine smiled for all answer and opened the package given him by Olaf, while Strogonoff looked on with ashy face, feeling that now his cause was lost indeed, when the name of treason had no effect.

The grand duke quietly read the letter sent him by his brother and made no sign of emotion till he had finished. Then his voice trembled ever so slightly as he said to Strogonoff:

"You can take these back to his majesty without the trouble of arresting the swordmaster. Will that do?"

Strogonoff could hardly believe his eyes as he saw the dispatch which had cost him so much trouble actually placed in his hands.

"What am I to understand, your highness?"

"You are to understand that I refuse to make any compacts under duress, count," was the stern answer. "I am going back to St. Petersburg to-night. You and your police have tried my patience too long. Where is the Princess Natalie Dembinski?"

The question was so sudden that every one started, for it was the first time the grand duke had openly mentioned the name of his mistress.

"Highness, in Wilna, I think," stammered the chief of police. "I have not had charge of her."

"And yet it seems you have chased her, or how do I find you here, and how comes it that her brother, Prince Ivan, was forced to flee from her? Come forward, Ivan, for it is time that these mysteries were cleared up. Where did you leave the princess?"

"In Wilna, highness. I was driven off by a party of police who killed our coachman, Sergius."

"Where did you leave her, Olaf?" asked Constantine, suddenly turning on the swordmaster, who stood by with folded arms.

"I left her twice, highness: the first time in charge of Tekli Aga, when I was taken prisoner.

* *Skäl*, the Danish term for a butt with the head, in which the Danes are very expert and dangerous.

Afterward I rejoined the gracious lady alone, near Postavly, and continued with her party till the coachman was killed."

"And where is she now?"

"That I will tell your highness *alone*."

"How came you here with Count Strogonoff?"

"The count arrested me, highness. I am his prisoner, he says, so I brought him on here till I had obeyed the orders of his majesty. Now I am ready to go back."

"And where is the princess? Speak out."

"I will tell your highness *alone*."

"You need not be so mysterious," interposed Strogonoff, with a sneer. "We knew that the princess must be in St. Catherine's convent as soon as we had time to think. The abbess is a *Dembinski*."

Olaf turned on him with a smile of cruel politeness.

"You are determined, I see, to make me kill you, with your exposures of confidences. Can you not have a little discretion, Count Strogonoff? You compel me then to punish you once more." Then he resumed to the grand duke:

"Your highness bears me witness that I betray no secrets in public like this gentleman, who has done me the honor to question a statement of mine, made before you. I have already told the gentleman that he must apologize to me or fight me, for former doings, and inasmuch as he is an amateur, I have consented to fight him blindfold."

"Why, what is all this about?" asked Constantine.

"Merely that this is the 'Man with the Whip' of whom I once told your highness; that he has persecuted me with his company all through a long journey, and that I ask your highness's permission to end the thing now. It may amuse your highness to see a man fence blindfold."

"Blindfold, Olaf! Surely you are not in earnest?"

"Perfectly so, highness. It is the only way I can satisfy the insult and equalize the chances. Does your highness consent to see the duel?"

"Willingly," cried Constantine, with a laugh. "How is it, Strogonoff, are you willing to fight this man of steel?"

The minister of police was very pale, but he commanded himself sufficiently to say:

"I am ready, highness."

"Then, by St. Isaac of Moscow, get them the swords and put them out on the square," cried the grand duke, in a jovial tone. "Why, gentlemen, here is sport enough for an evening's entertainment. Get the swords."

CHAPTER XXVI.

THE BLINDFOLD DUEL.

By the time that the preparations for the singular duel were complete, the news had spread abroad through Grodno, where quite a number of officers were assembled.

Grand Duke Constantine had always been known for a wild and reckless fellow, but it was the first time in his history that he had ever openly abetted a duel in public.

The present duel was such a singular one that it excited universal interest. Every officer in Grodno had heard of Olaf Iron Wrist, the *suite* of the grand duke having duly chanted his wonderful prowess.

When they heard that he was to fence or fight in public, with sharp point, against the chief of the secret police, Count Strogonoff, who was noted in the capital as a swordsman, the interest rose to fever heat.

By the time the grand duke was ready to come down-stairs, a ring of officers was formed in front of the door, all eagerly waiting for the appearance of the combatants.

It was more like the ancient "trial by combat" than an ordinary, illegal duel.

Presently the czar's brother made his appearance at the door, followed by his staff, while a number of soldiers brought out chairs and arranged them in a semicircle on the top of the steps.

"Now, gentlemen," said the Grand Duke Constantine, in a loud voice, to the officers outside, "remember that this is no duel, but merely a trial of skill between two gentlemen, one of whom fancies he can keep off a seeing man with his eyes blindfold. The first blood drawn decides the contest."

This he said, remembering the fact that dueling was forbidden by the law, and not wishing to appear to defy it too openly.

Then he took his seat, and a moment later the two men who were to fight made their appearance.

Both were in their shirt-sleeves and unarmed, but each was attended by a second, carrying a sword under his arm.

The preparations were very simple and soon made. They consisted in Draukovitch binding his handkerchief round the eyes of Olaf Iron Wrist, placing him in the middle of the ring, giving him a sword and bidding him "defend himself."

Another officer led Strogonoff forward, placed a sword in his hand, too, and bid him "attack the enemy."

Then they were left alone.

In the center stood Olaf, slightly bent forward, with his sword pointing diagonally up. He was motionless, except as to his head, which turned from side to side as he listened intently.

On one side was Strogonoff, pale and nervous, but still grasping his sword firmly, as he prepared to advance on his apparently unguarded adversary.

Presently he stole off in a circuit to the left; but the swordmaster, listening keenly, heard the footsteps on the pavement and immediately turned, facing him.

The chief of police quietly stooped down and began to remove his boots, but was deterred by the groans of the officers all round the circle.

Constantine heard the groans, and cried:

"Leave them alone, gentlemen. I will wager a hundred to ten that Iron Wrist draws first blood."

"Make it a thousand, highness," cried the cheery voice of the blindfolded swordmaster. "This Strogonoff is trying to take off his boots. I hear him. Let him do it."

Down went the Russian on the ground, and off came his boots in a twinkling. Then, carrying them in one hand and his sword in the other, he began to prowl round the Dane in a stealthy, feline manner.

Olaf listened and turned slowly round as he caught the shuffle of feet, but the Russian stepped so softly that at last he lost hearing of him.

This became evident from the altered manner of the man. He no longer stood erect and confident, but began to crouch, keeping both hands before him, as if groping.

Strogonoff saw it and stood perfectly still, while the other continued to turn slowly, following an imaginary sound.

Then at last, when Olaf's back was almost to him, the Russian made a spring forward like a tiger, uttering a hoarse oath of triumph as he thrust hard.

But that very oath, irrepressible utterance of a brutal soul, proved the ruin of Strogonoff in that duel.

Olaf heard it and wheeled about in an instant, his point presented and whirling round in small circles.

The thrust of the chief of police had nearly reached its mark when one of these whirling counter-parries caught the blade and dashed it aside.

The instant that he heard the click of steel on steel, the whole attitude and expression of the swordmaster changed.

"Now I have you!" he shouted, and at once lunged out at Strogonoff, as straight as if he had seen him; so straight that the minister was obliged to parry and leap back.

Click! Click!

Again steel met steel, and again Iron Wrist laughed, as he began to threaten the other, blindfold though he was, keeping the touch of his sword all the time, and driving the man who could see all round the ring, amid the enthusiastic applause of the spectators.

Strogonoff parried and retreated, but he did not dare to thrust; his hands were too full.

At last he uttered a sharp cry, and jumped back with the exclamation:

"Enough! I am wounded."

Immediately Olaf halted, withdrew the bandage from his eyes with a bow, and waved his sword in salute.

"I am satisfied," was his only remark, as he walked proudly back to where the Grand Duke Constantine was standing up before his chair, beaming with smiles.

The Russian prince embraced the swordmaster with the appearance of great affection, crying:

"Welcome, my prince of swordsmen. Thou hast beaten him fairly. Such fencing I never saw before."

"Nay, highness, the *fencing* was nothing," said Olaf. "It was finding my man that was the trouble. Once the swords touch I know where I am, and where I hit. I touched the count in the right breast on a line with the shoulder, and my point went in and came out. Examine and see."

Sure enough, when Strogonoff was examined by the surgeon, which was almost immediately, they found the wounds as Olaf had said, in the fleshy part of the right breast, not deep, but with two holes, where the sword had pinched up the flesh like a pin.

Then Olaf went up to his adversary and offered him his hand frankly, saying:

"Blood wipes out blows. I forgive you the whip now, and I am ready to go back with you as your prisoner before the czar."

Strogonoff took the offered hand and pressed it languidly, with a smile of mysterious import.

"Very well," he said, "I hold you to your promise! Come at once. Get into my tarantass."

Olaf hesitated a moment, but the other continued:

"Your promise is given. If you do not go I will, and I will report you to the czar as having broken your parole. You cannot fight out of that quarrel."

Olaf Iron Wrist said not another word, but

stepped into the tarantass, in his shirt-sleeves as he was.

"I am ready, count; please send for my things," he observed, quietly.

"Where are you going, Olaf?" cried Constantine.

"To St. Petersburg, highness, to see the czar. I will be there in twelve hours," was the reply.

Then Strogonoff entered the tarantass. He had his papers and his prisoner at last.

He thought that he was safe for the journey, and was already giving orders to his servants (all secret police agents) when the grand duke overthrew all his plans for the moment by the request:

"Count, I have a favor to ask you, for the granting of which I will be responsible to his majesty. Let your prisoner come and sit by me for five minutes. I will see that he does not escape, and he shall remain in your sight. I wish to speak to him in private."

With a very bad grace the chief of police answered:

"The carriage is at your imperial highness's disposal."

The grand duke rose and waved his hand.

"Retire, all, out of ear-shot."

In a moment the circle widened, and the grand duke entered the tarantass, from whence Strogonoff and his servants retired. He was seen to be conversing very earnestly with the swordmaster, though their tones were so low as to be inaudible to the crowd.

After about ten minutes of this consultation, the Russian prince left the carriage, saying aloud:

"Then farewell, swordmaster-general. If you prefer his majesty's service to mine you are prudent. I will meet you at St. Petersburg, and see if the emperor, my brother, insists on retaining you. I do not give you up yet."

"What a trouble about a miserable fencing-master," muttered Draukovitch, enviously.

CHAPTER XXVII.

THE CZAR IN TROUBLE.

THE CZAR of all the Russias was pacing his cabinet in the Summer Palace in a decidedly bad temper. A deep frown of care and anxiety—a look that afterward became habitual to him—was on his brow, and he frequently looked out of the window toward Vassili Ostrof, where the dark mass of the Dembinski palace, in full view above the trees, seemed to him a perpetual reminder of the ambitious schemes of the Polish family.

Nicholas knew that his position was as yet insecure, that the succession in the Russian empire had been disturbed ere that day, and that the dread shadow of assassination was ready as of yore behind the throne, to darken the festivities that surround a coronation.

He knew that his grandfather, Paul, had been strangled in the very room in which his father, Alexander, had died so suddenly, and he knew that rumor connected the name of his dead father with the murder of his dead grandfather.

The saying that the Government of Russia is "a despotism limited by assassination" recurred to his mind, and he remembered the many dark tragedies that had marked the annals of his family from the days of Czar Peter down to his own reign.

He knew that, so to speak, he held the crown under the sufferance of his brother Constantine, the idol of the army, who had but to give the signal for revolt to succeed.

He knew that, were his brother to marry before himself and have an heir, the temptation to revolt would be made tenfold stronger, and he ground his teeth as he reflected that crafty old Prince Dembinski probably knew this as well as himself, and was playing his cards accordingly.

Thinking that he had the Princess Natalie safe in prison, and willing to bring his brother to some definite agreement, he had sent him, by the hand of Olaf, the swordmaster, a written consent to Constantine'smorganatic marriage, provided the prince would abandon all claims to the throne.

He fancied that this consent, coming at a time when Constantine would be keenly anxious for Natalie's safety, would bring the proud lover to sue for peace and consent to anything to save his darling from the horrors of Siberia.

Now, he reflected, all the advantage he might have gained from such a position was neutralized by the one fact that Natalie was not a prisoner. Constantine might take any advantage he pleased of the consent, and if he chose to commit a little deceit, might secure a legal marriage with the princess in Warsaw itself, by showing the document, concealing part of its contents and insisting on the rest.

"It is three days since Strogonoff followed after that devil of a swordmaster," muttered the emperor, "and neither has returned. I feared that he would not succeed, yet I let him go. That Iron Wrist should have been my man at first. He is worth a thousand others for desperate service."

Even as he spoke, he saw a cloud of dust coming rapidly up the road in front of the palace, as a carriage dashed to the gate. Full of

anxiety, he caught up an opera glass to ascertain who were the new-comers, the distance to the gate being too great for his unassisted vision.

He stamped his foot with an exclamation of joyful surprise. There was Strogonoff, erect and stern as ever, while beside him was the figure of the swordmaster.

The emperor could hardly restrain his joy within the bounds of etiquette, as he waited for the coming of the two. He fumed and fretted over the delay made at the gate by the officer of the guard, who hesitated to admit the minister of police in the dusty dress he then wore, and had much ado to restrain himself from rushing out bareheaded into the garden to cut short the colloquy.

Only the knowledge that such a course would show his anxiety too plainly, prevented him from doing so, and he forced himself to wait patiently till the minister had surmounted the obstacles of etiquette and was ushered into the cabinet, followed by Olaf.

As soon as the servant had retired, Nicholas turned to Iron Wrist with a countenance full of scorn and anger. He thought that Strogonoff had beaten the swordmaster in some way; and with the caprice of a tyrant, whose word is law, determined to visit his former anxiety on Olaf's head.

"So, sir," he exclaimed, "I see that with all your prowess, the police minister has taken you, single-handed. Where are the dispatches I gave you?"

He asked in a sharp, angry tone, but Olaf replied, with imperturbable serenity:

"The dispatches were delivered by me to his highness, as your majesty ordered. After I had executed your majesty's commands, Count Strogonoff showed me the order from your majesty to arrest me. Of course I surrendered. I am here."

The czar listened with lowering brow, and then turned on the chief of police with a savage marl.

"You said you would bring back those dispatches. Where are they, sirrah?"

But Strogonoff was equally imperturbable.

"Here, sire."

He handed the dispatch to the emperor, who looked at it, eagerly, and then exclaimed:

"It has been opened. Who did it?"

"His imperial highness, the Grand Duke Constantine."

"What! my brother opened this, and yet you save it?"

"His highness gave it back to me, sire."

"Where, then, is his highness, now?" asked the emperor, with an uneasy sense that all was not right.

Boom!!!

The deep report of a heavy gun from the fortress of Cronstadt shook the windows of the palace as the czar spoke, and Olaf Iron Wrist took free liberty of replying:

"He was entering Postavly when we were half-way to Psakoff, sire; but, judging from the mutes, he must now be in sight of this city."

Boom!!! Boom!!! Boom!!!

Three more guns announced that Olaf was right, and the czar turned pale. Constantine came back again.

CHAPTER XXVIII.

THE ORDER OF ARREST.

CONSTANTINE ROMANOFF, "the mad duke," as his enemies called him, "the good duke," as the soldiers fondly christened him, was indeed back in St. Petersburg; and even as the czar looked forth from the windows he could see the long train of dust that announced the approach of the carriage.

In truth, Constantine, whose open and generous nature had always abhorred the restraints of intrigue and secrecy, had taken a vigorous resolution, when surprised by the apparitions of Olaf and Strogonoff at Grodno. He found that he had miscalculated the powers of the emperor's agents to disconcert his scheme of a secret marriage with Natalie Dembinski, and determined to come back and face the worst for the sake of love.

As the emperor saw the approaching dust pass the gates of the Summer Palace, and go on to the bridge that spanned the river and led to Vassili Ostrof, he was still more surprised and alarmed. His face turned deadly pale as he saw the carriages trot rapidly over the bridge and actually file openly into the hated Dembinski Palace in broad day.

With the opera-glass one could now plainly see five or six large openings in the gray stone walls, and the lately lonely and deserted gardens were full of glittering spears and scarlet jackets, as the Red Cossacks of the grand duke's escort pranced about.

The chief of police looked out with the czar, and he, too, turned pale. He knew that the imperial order forbidding the association of the Dembinskis with any member of the Romanoff family had been in existence for some time, and here was the grand duke openly disobeying it.

"Please your majesty, may I go see to this?" he muttered in a low tone. "If it is life against life, my men will do their duty."

The czar's eyes met his in a glance of startled

inquiry, but the minister said nothing more, and the czar ejaculated:

"Do what is best. I trust you."

Strogonoff left the room, and Olaf Iron Wrist remained alone with the czar, who did not seem to observe him, so deep were his meditations, as he paced to and fro, frowning.

Presently the Dane, who was becoming a little embarrassed by his position, coughed slightly. Nicholas started, and seemed to realize for the first time that he was not alone.

Then an idea entered the emperor's head, and he approached the swordmaster with an air of the most winning softness.

"Ah, my brave Iron Wrist, it is thou. Thou hast obeyed my orders to the letter. Such men are worth their weight in gold in these times."

Olaf said nothing, but bowed low. Being by no means a fool, he realized that the emperor was, for unknown reasons, very much afraid of something or some one, and wished to secure his services as a guardian or agent.

"Thou knowest, count, that my brother loves me not, and plots against my throne," continued the czar.

Olaf interrupted him without ceremony.

"Your majesty is mistaken. I have heard his highness say that he loves to be grand duke in a province where he has no equals, rather than to be one sovereign amid the kings of Europe."

"But he is surrounded by a family of cursed intriguing Poles who wish to set him against me, Olaf. That scheming woman, the Princess Natalie, wishes to be czarina, and would stir up a rebellion, could she do so safely."

Olaf was silent. He had learned enough of court manners to know that it is not prudent to contradict an absolute monarch too often.

"My faithful Olaf," pursued Nicholas, "I have made thee colonel and swordmaster-general from a nameless stranger. Thou wilt serve me faithfully. Is it not so?"

"I will do anything to serve your majesty."

Nicholas looked at him steadily for a moment.

"Go and arrest my brother."

Olaf started slightly, but made no further sign of emotion as he inquired:

"After arresting his highness what shall I do, sire?"

"Bring him here," answered the czar, overjoyed at meeting no more resistance.

"And supposing that his highness calls on his suite to protect him from arrest, what shall I do, sire?"

The question was put in a matter-of-course way, but alarmed the czar, especially when Olaf continued:

"The soldiers will not follow me to arrest him. To make the attempt is to excite a mutiny."

"Then you must see that he does not remain in the palace of the Dembinski plotters alive," said the czar, in a low tone. "You are to kill him if he resists, then come back and report to me. If you succeed in arresting him I will give you a post worth five times as much as you are getting now; if you kill him you shall be sent safely from Russia with a hundred thousand roubles in your pocket."

The swordmaster bowed low.

"I cannot promise to kill his highness, your majesty, for I have eaten his bread; but I can promise to bring him here or die in the attempt. I have the honor to wish your majesty good-morning."

Then he backed out of the presence, went down-stairs, and saw Nicolai the Cossack, who had followed him all the way from Grodno on the box of the tarantass, sitting there as stolid as ever beside the police driver.

The Cossack saluted when he saw his officer, and Olaf said to him:

"Drive me over to Vassili Ostrof at once. Where has the Count Strogonoff gone?"

"The count rode away on horseback, your nobility."

"Then drive where I told you."

He flung himself down in the corner of the tarantass, thinking over all sorts of plans to save his friend the grand duke from the danger which menaced him, and when at last the tarantass rolled into the Dembinski garden he started with surprise. He had forgotten where he was.

All the former mystery of this famous garden had vanished, for the stone doors stood wide open on their heavy iron pivots, and one could plainly see the beautiful workmanship of the jambs, which had made so much mystery possible. The doors were built into solid iron frames with rough masonry, the edges being rounded off and smoothed in polished granite, so that the chinks were imperceptible when the door was closed, the rest of the wall being built in the same fashion all the way round.

But the Dane had but little time or thought for these things. He had a duty to perform, and he was one of those men whom no danger deters. He drove up to the open door of the palace, where the sentries saluted him, thinking him still one of the household, and at once stalked up to the grand saloon.

He had not far to go to find Constantine, as he had expected.

There, in the midst of the saloon, with Natalie at his side, and surrounded by the members of the Dembinski family, stood the grand duke, looking angry and excited, for he had been in dispute with the old prince as to the prudence of his return, and was fast working himself into a passion.

To him, thus excited, the appearance of the swordmaster was the signal for a burst of anger, as he cried:

"So, my brave Iron Wrist, you could not protect your charge from the police, it seems, but must leave her to the nuns of Wilna! By my faith, all of my followers are playing me false. Here is Draukovitch, my chief aide-de-camp, in correspondence with Strogonoff, and you have gone over to my brother's service. What next?"

The swordmaster advanced and bowed respectfully.

"I was the bearer of a message from his majesty to your imperial highness, and exceeded my duty in order to place the honorable lady in safety. Your imperial highness found her safe, I believe."

"Indeed, your highness, the gentleman did as much as any ten common men could have done," urged Natalie, in coaxing tones. "He at least should not be blamed."

Constantine's brow cleared, for the gentle voice of Natalie had power over him in his wildest moods.

"Well, what do you want?" he asked, more placably.

"I am sent to request the attendance of your imperial highness before his majesty the czar, at once."

"And suppose I refuse to come?"

"Then your imperial highness will compel me to blow my brains out before the honorable lady," was the quiet reply.

The grand duke started and looked earnestly at Olaf. The swordmaster had one hand in his breast and gazed with perfect calmness at his late patron.

"Will your highness come?" he asked once more, and he half drew his hand forth.

Constantine turned pale for the first time in his life, and raised both hands deprecatingly.

"No, no; all the thrones in the world are not worth the life of my king of swordsmen. I will come: I will come. But mark me, Olaf, if there be treachery—"

"There can be no treachery while I am there," said Olaf, in a grave tone. "If it comes to a question of life against life, it will not be that of your highness that will be lost. I answer for that."

CHAPTER XXIX.

LIFE AGAINST LIFE.

ST. PETERSBURG was all in a ferment at the sight of Constantine returned; and the news that he had gone to the Dembinski palace spread with lightning rapidity.

Of course the fact that his highness had been carrying on an intrigue with the lady who was famed as the "Pearl of Poland" was matter of scandal all through the city, and had been during the late czar's life. Princes cannot have secrets.

But the Russian nobility, noble-like, had never associated the idea of honorable marriage with the matter.

"His highness amuses himself. None of our business," was their usual comment.

The return of the grand duke to St. Petersburg, and the open sojourn of himself and suite in the Dembinski palace, changed all this. People could not ignore the matter any longer. It was clear that an explosion was at hand.

As for the soldiers of the Guards, they were all in a ferment. The sound of the imperial salute had warned them of the coming of the czar's brother, and they began to gather in knots on the parade-ground, thicker and thicker, before the officers were aware of what was coming, amid every appearance of a full-fledged mutiny.

In the meantime the Grand Duke Constantine, taking the Princess Natalie on his arm, said to Iron Wrist:

"Lead on, sir. I follow."

They entered a carriage together, and together proceeded to the Summer Palace, while Prince Dembinski and his son Ivan, seeing that the storm had burst and that there was no shelter for them save under Constantine's wing, followed in the next carriage and dismounted at the steps at the same moment as the grand duke.

Short as was the interval since Olaf had left the palace, he found that the active Strogonoff had improved it. The whole of the palace grounds was full of the dark-green uniforms of the police, armed with carbines and swords, the only force on which the minister could depend.

Strogonoff himself, dark and menacing, stood near the foot of the grand staircase, and addressed Olaf as he passed:

"His majesty is in the throne-room. Take your prisoners there."

"I have no prisoners," was the curt answer, as Olaf passed on.

Constantine heard the remark, but said nothing.

ing, and then into the heart of his enemies stalked the czar's brother, as proud as Lucifer.

The princess by his side seemed as composed as if she had been at home, but the other Dembinskis, father and son, were decidedly ill at ease.

They had good reason to be, for Strogonoff gave a silent signal which they knew insured them a close watch as long as they were in the palace and a probable arrest if they tried to leave it.

The whole party trooped up the grand staircase, the suite and staff of the grand duke remaining outside in the garden. Then into the throne-room they passed, to find it full of police, ranged against the walls like statues, while the emperor sat on his throne, surrounded by the high civil officers of state.

Not one soldier's uniform was in the room, save those of Olaf, Constantine, and the czar himself.

The grand duke and his party walked to the foot of the throne, where sat the emperor; and all bowed.

Nicholas never noticed them, but sat looking sternly over their heads till Strogonoff's harsh voice said:

"Your majesty, the prisoners."

"Who dares call me a prisoner?" asked Constantine, in a loud tone. "Sire, my brother, I ask you if you mean to tolerate insolence like this to me?"

The emperor looked round at him, and gave an affected start.

"What! Has your highness tired of Warsaw already?" he asked.

"I have not been to Warsaw, and you know it," was the bold reply. "I have come back to demand an explanation of the insolent interference of this minister of police in my private affairs."

The angry tones of his voice rung through the room, which at once became intensely still, and every one except Olaf turned pale, for they saw that the crisis had come.

Then Constantine looked around him with the fierce stare of an angry Romanoff, and shouted:

"You dogs, bring chairs at once. Do you see that the lady stands? Quick!"

There was an instant proffer of chairs, into one of which Natalie Dembinski sunk, quite overcome.

As for the czar, he hardly knew what to say since his brother had taken the initiative, and Constantine continued:

"How is it that your majesty has seen fit to allow this officious Strogonoff to dog my path to Warsaw and arrest my swordmaster, besides shooting my Circassian, Tekli Aga?"

"Has he done so?" asked Nicholas, frigidly.

"He has."

"Then, if he acted under orders, he was right," answered the czar, firmly. "How is it," he continued, "that you, whom I ordered to Warsaw a week since, have left your post?"

His tone was stern and cold, but Constantine did not quail.

"Because I found I was being treated unjustly," he replied.

Nicholas frowned.

"The way to secure justice is by respectful remonstrance, not by disobedience and treason."

"That may be, when positions are different," was the equally stern reply. "Your majesty knows that I love a beautiful and amiable lady, and that I am not one to be thwarted."

"I know that certain designing Poles wish to snatch the throne from under me before my time," suddenly shouted the czar, in tones of concentrated fury, "and that while I am czar it shall not be done. Arrest the Dembinskis, Strogonoff."

In a moment there was a rush and a scuffle, amid which Prince Dembinski and his son were hustled off to the middle of the room and surrounded by police.

Constantine, erroneously thinking that immediate treachery to himself was intended, drew his sword and cut down a police officer who stood near Natalie, shouting:

"Touch a hair of her head and I will raze this palace to the ground and hang every man here."

Then there was a hush, for there was no going back from those bold words.

The emperor shook all over on his throne and sunk back, exclaiming:

"Do not hurt the lady. My brother, no one wishes to hurt her."

Constantine glared round the room like a wild animal, for the "mad duke" was fully roused. Every one quailed before that glance except two men.

One of these was Iron Wrist, who stood with folded arms between the czar and his brother, watching both keenly; the other was Count Strogonoff.

Great beads of sweat stood out on the face of the minister of police, but his eye was clear and calm, and the expression of his face was that of intense watchfulness and anxiety rather than fear. He had too much at stake to give up the fight while there was a chance, and presented the singular spectacle of a man, naturally a

physical coward, nerved into coolness and courage by the desperation of his position. For Strogonoff knew well the power which Constantine held in reserve to use if he liked.

The grand duke, seeing all avoid his glance, turned again to the emperor.

"Now, sire, my brother, I have but one demand to make. Consent at once to my marriage with this lady and I will go to Warsaw."

"You know well that I cannot," was the low reply. "My own life would not be worth a day."

"If your majesty still holds to the consent sent me in Grodno I will agree to the terms and renounce the succession," continued Constantine.

Strogonoff, who was standing behind him, facing the czar, made a silent but earnest signal to the latter to refuse, and Nicholas braced himself up, saying:

"What do you mean? I sent no consent to any one. I will never consent to your marriage with a Pole."

Constantine stared at his brother, while the hot blood mounted to his brow.

"You sent me no consent?"

"None."

"The Swordmaster Olaf brought it."

"He brought nothing of the sort. Produce it if you can."

"I have it not. I gave it back to Strogonoff."

"Exactly. Whatever it was I have recalled it, since you have seen fit to rebel against my lawful authority. I have determined to be Czar of Russia or nothing. You are under arrest. Give up your sword."

All the while that Nicholas was speaking Strogonoff was signaling the police, who were edging nearer.

When the speech was ended strong hands suddenly seized the grand duke, who found himself covered by the muzzles of four or five pistols.

Then Nicholas arose in his seat and seemed to swell with indignation, the more so that Constantine remained quite passive and did not offer to struggle.

At last he seemed to have his brother in his power, and all the fears that he had hidden united to make him cruel and relentless.

"So you would dictate terms to me!" he cried. "You forgot when you placed your head in the lion's den that he had teeth and claws to bite and rend. You shall never see Warsaw, now."

"Crack! Crack! Crack!"

Outside the window on the still summer air, came the sound of rifle-shots, succeeded by a hoarse buzz, amid which could be heard occasional loud cries.

The czar started, and Strogonoff hurried to the window to look out, while Constantine smiled proudly.

"You thought I was defenseless," he said.

"Listen to that, and touch a hair of my head."

Back came Strogonoff to the czar and said, in a low tone:

"The soldiers are up. It is life against life. If he dies in a fit, they will have no leader. Give the word, sire, and I will take the responsibility."

The minister of police was ghastly pale and his eyes were staring wildly, but he looked determined. As for Nicholas, his constitutional timidity reasserted itself and his teeth chattered as he faltered:

"It cannot be helped. Do it."

All this while Olaf Iron Wrist had stood impassively by the side of the czar, not offering to speak.

Now he saw that the time for action was come.

Strogonoff's men tightened their hold on the grand duke, while the minister drew out a handkerchief and a small vial. Olaf saw the plot in a moment. They were to smother the grand duke and swear he died in a fit.

He said nothing till Strogonoff had emptied the contents of the vial into the handkerchief, and then he suddenly shouted, at the top of his powerful voice:

"Halt, there! If it is life against life, I play the game."

Strogonoff looked up and beheld him with a small pistol cocked beside the czar's head, his left hand pressed firmly on the emperor's shoulder.

"Do not rise, your majesty," he said, in a sharp whisper. "Life against life is a desperate game. The first dead gives the second a crown, and I have eaten the bread of his highness. It is time for a compromise."

Nicholas looked up in wonder.

"Would you murder me?"

"Instantly; and my patron will be the czar and grateful to me for saving him. Order Strogonoff out of the room, sire, or I pull the trigger."

"Strogonoff, quick, go!" gasped Nicholas, for there was something in the cold blue eyes of the swordmaster that told him he was in earnest.

Strogonoff uttered a groan and recoiled.

"All lost!" he exclaimed, as he rushed from the room.

Meantime the buzz outside was increasing, and the police in the room began to tremble. They could hear the trampling of feet and shouting that told of the rapid approach of a crowd of excited soldiers. Involuntarily they let go the Grand Duke Constantine and both the Dembinskis. Olaf noted the movement, and took advantage of it.

"They are coming!" he cried, sternly. "If they find you here, there will be trouble. Leave your prisoners and retire."

Instantly the police began to stream out of the room, and the swordmaster, replacing his pistol, left the czar and went to the grand duke.

"Quick, your highness," he said, in a low tone. "Now is the time for a compromise before the soldiers arrive. Then it will be too late to avert a crime. He will consent to anything."

Then Olaf retired, while Constantine, going up to the quaking czar, said, in a low voice:

"Come, do you consent? I want none of your thrones, coupled with a dowdy German princess for a wife. I love Natalie, and I will have her. I give up the succession. Do you consent?"

As he spoke they heard a loud clamor in the hall below, and Nicholas, white with fear, stammered:

"Yes, yes, I consent."

"Give me the dispatch, then," was the prompt reply. "I cannot trust my life on your word."

With a nervous motion the czar produced once more the dispatch over which there had been so much trouble, and just at that moment the door flew open, and into the room burst a crowd of excited officers, with drawn swords.

At the sight of the little group by the throne they halted in amazement.

There was the emperor on his chair, with his brother standing by him, placing a package of papers in his breast. Near the throne on another chair, sat a lady of singular grace and beauty, behind whom stood two gentlemen who were recognized as Prince Dembinski and his son Ivan.

As for Olaf the swordmaster he was some distance off, facing the door, and, as the excited group entered, he raised both hands as if in wonder, crying:

"How now, gentlemen, what means this disturbance? His highness and the czar are busy. Retire!"

Olaf was perfectly cool amid tumults.

He placed Constantine before the czar on purpose, to let the presumed insurgents know that he was a partisan of the grand duke.

There was confusion at the door, and a voice cried:

"Is the grand duke in arrest or not?"

Constantine heard the words and came forward.

"In arrest! Who said so? I am as free as air. His majesty has just consented to my marriage with the Princess Natalie Dembinski, the Pearl of Poland, and the wedding will be celebrated to-morrow."

There was a pause of amazement, and then another voice cried:

"We heard you were in danger."

"Never so safe," was the reply. "Come, gentlemen, I thank you for the interest you have shown in me though it was unnecessary. I invite you all to attend at St. Isaac's cathedral at noon to-morrow. His majesty has promised to attend."

All this while the emperor sat still in his chair gnawing his mustache to conceal his mortification, but not daring to interfere. He knew that the Russian soldier, so docile and obedient at ordinary times, has rare fits of mutiny, which are terrible while they last, and he had seen them before. He knew that he was safe so long as his brother did not encourage the revolt, and that once the marriage was accomplished and the act renouncing the succession signed, all danger of disturbance would be over. Still, it was a bitter mortification to him to feel that his crown hung on the will of another, even if his brother. He rose up as Constantine spoke, and said, in a loud voice:

"Retire, all. The czar wishes to be alone with his brother. The marriage will take place at St. Isaac's to-morrow."

Then Constantine waved his hand and the soldiers retired at once.

The grand duke had triumphed.

CHAPTER XXX.

CONCLUSION.

THE Dembinski Palace was lighted up the next evening with great brilliancy, and St. Petersburg was all ablaze with lanterns and fireworks, while the bells of all the churches were chiming merrily for the marriage of the Grand Duke Constantine and the Princess Natalie Dembinski.

The ceremony had been duly solemnized, the prince at the same time making his declaration before the Patriarch of Moscow that he had abandoned, for himself and his heirs, all claim on the throne of Russia in favor of his next of kin.

Thus everything was peaceably settled, and Nicholas felt that his crown was thenceforth secure. All the idolatry which the army, and especially the guards, had lavished on Constan-

line was not proof against what they called his "lack of spirit" in giving up all claim to the throne for the sake of a Pole. They crowded curiously to see the wedding, but there was no more danger of their running any risk to place Constantine on the throne and give themselves a Polish czarina. They hated the Poles too much to do any such thing.

"Ah, my lord," said Natalie that evening as they entered the portals of the Dembinski Palace, "I was not worth so much sacrifice. The time will come you may regret it when too late."

"Sweetheart," he answered, folding her in his arms, "when you have lived among us Romanoffs a few more years, you will find that all the jewels in the crown of Russia are not worth one true woman's love. Now, I am first in Warsaw, but were my brother to die to-day and I be made czar against my will I might pine in vain for thy love. The czar's duty must rule and make him wed some fat German princess of a good Protestant family, as ugly and stupid as most German princesses. Now I am free, then I should be a slave."

"I cannot argue against you," she answered, smiling, "for I am too happy. But, oh, my lord, where would both of us have been to-night had it not been for Olaf Svenson?"

"I in prison, you on the road to Siberia. But where is our Olaf?"

He looked round and saw the swordmaster at a little distance among the staff officers. Olaf advanced at the prince's beck.

"Tell me, Sir Swordmaster-general," said Constantine, with a smile, "how is it that I see thee here? I should rather have looked for thee at the Summer Palace."

"I am no longer swordmaster-general," answered the Dane, quietly.

Constantine started.

"Why not?"

"Because I am Danish, and Danes are prudent."

"What do you mean?"

"I was compelled, in order to save your highness, to resign my situation, which I did by cocking a pistol. I am now an applicant to follow your highness to Warsaw and thence for a passport to America."

"To America! Why there?" asked Constantine, feeling that the Dane was right in thinking, as he implied, that his absence from Russia would be good policy. "Why not stay with me at Warsaw?"

"Because it would soon be whispered about that your friend and swordmaster had threatened the emperor's life, and got off scot free. That would not do, highness."

"Then why not go to France, Germany, anywhere? Why go to America, that country of barbarians?"

"It is just because I have heard that they fight in a new fashion over there, highness, and I wish to try what it is like. I hope your highness will not refuse me."

"Since it must be so," said the grand duke, with a sigh, "you shall not go empty-handed. When we get to Warsaw I will see that you are provided with funds fit to do credit to you all over Europe, for, but for you, I should not to-day be the proud husband of the Pearl of Poland, worth all the jewels in the Crown of Muscovy."

THE END.

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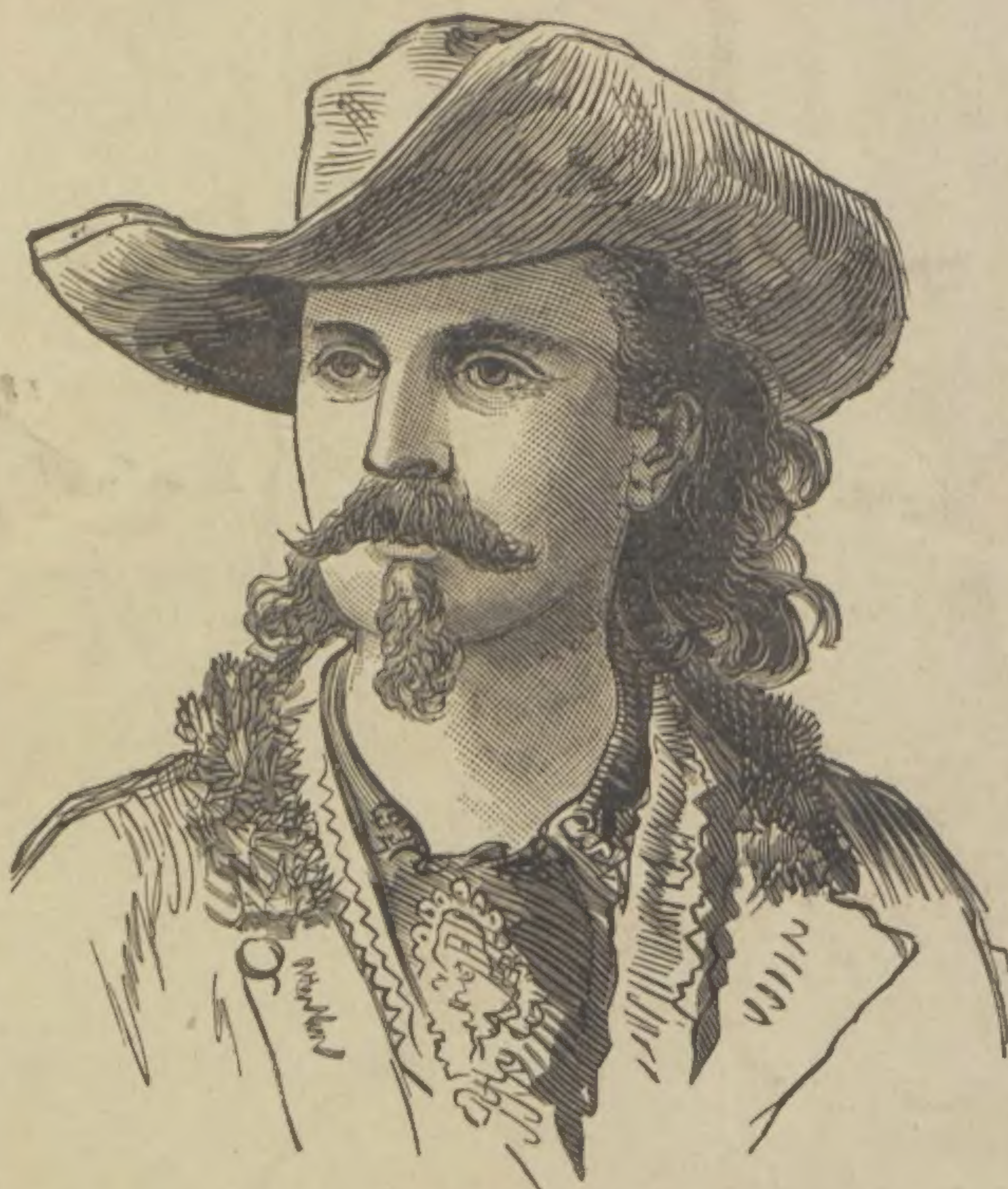
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